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## **Against the fringe ; With more than 800 performances and dozens of exhibitions in 77 venues, the Infringement Festival is big, bold and, yes, bizarre.**

**By Colin Dabkowski**

Jul 20, 2012

**I**t all started with one angry theater critic.

In the summer of 2001, as Donovan King and his fellow actors prepared for a performance of their unorthodox "Car Stories" project at the Montreal Fringe Festival, a critic from the Montreal Gazette appeared and requested her customary free tickets.

But the "Car Stories" crew, which has a bad taste in its mouth from authority and the status quo, insisted that she pay. And that's when things got ugly.

The critic, King says, stormed off. The "Car Stories" troupe wrote a cheeky letter mocking the critic and posted it at Fringe Festival locations across the city. In response, the Montreal Gazette -- the city's only English-language daily and the chief corporate sponsor of the Fringe Festival that year -- threatened to discontinue coverage of the entire festival.

So the Fringe Festival did what large, sponsor-bound organizations are helpless to avoid and sided with its benefactor, kicking "Car Stories" to the curb.

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That decision turned out to be monumental. It fueled the creation, three years later, of the first Montreal Infringement Festival and spurred a small group of theater artists to launch what has since become one of the defining phenomena of Buffalo's ongoing cultural revival.

"We realized, 'Wait a minute -- there's a big, systemic problem here at the Fringe.' It's not just the fact that the corporate sponsor took precedence over the artist, [but] after more research, we began to realize that, in fact, the whole movement had become corporatized," King said in a phone interview from Montreal. "That's why we created the Infringement Festival, to try to recreate the original Fringe of 1947, which was, of course, an activist protest against a festival that refused to let the artists play there."

King's little festival, originally intended to be a "one-off culture jam" against the Montreal Fringe, spread to Buffalo the following year. Since then, the annual 11-day phenomenon has become this city's longest and most expansive cultural festival, this year hosting more than 800 performances and dozens of art shows in 77 venues.

The mammoth affair, headquartered in Allentown and expanding into the surrounding neighborhoods, runs Thursday through Aug. 5. It is, at its heart, an artistic free-for-all, run by a dedicated group of volunteers and open to anyone who applies.

Subversive Theatre Collective founder Kurt Schneiderman, who met King and company at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2004, imported Infringement to Buffalo the next year. Since then, it has grown to be by far the largest Infringement Festival -- Montreal's, by comparison, hosts about 50 acts. It fills an obvious creative gap in a Rust Belt city with no Fringe Festival to "infringe" against, but with a deep well of underground artists of all kinds.

"We went down and checked it out, and we were quite amazed that he had pulled it off. And to see where it is now? It blows my mind. To think something that was a one-off culture jam has become a major cultural event in Buffalo is quite beyond what my imagination expected," King said. "To see it blossom like that makes me realize that this festival is perfect for these types of cities like Buffalo, where they might not have a Fringe, but they have a lot of creative people."

When King makes his yearly trip to the Buffalo Infringement Festival next week -- he'll be mounting "Car Stories" along with "Infringement Therapy" and a new project, "Occupy Theatre" -- he will see the fruits of his activist experiment flourishing in Buffalo.

>Echoes of Occupy

This year, along with the festival's unpredictable blend of the offbeat and the bizarre, the spirit of Infringement will reflect the spirit of the Occupy Buffalo movement.

In addition to shared philosophies about the importance of a genuinely democratic government and society, Infringement and Occupy also share actual organizers. One of them is Curt Rotterdam, the Infringement music coordinator who also has played a major role in the local Occupy movement.

For starters, Rotterdam said, Occupy and Infringement both rally against corporate influence.

"Occupy hit the banks. Infringement hits music and art," he continued. "I think there is more art in Infringement than the Allentown art fest. So I guess we want to wake people up to what art is or could be, similar to [how] Occupy wanted to wake people up about what society is and what it could be."

With "Occupy Theatre," King and company are providing an opportunity for members of Occupy Buffalo to present theater, music and other performances that capture the story and ethos of the movement. The performance is slated for Aug. 1 in Nietzsche's.

The festival will also feature signs from Occupy Buffalo's months-long stand in Niagara Square in Wasteland Studios on Main Street, as well several screenings of Rotterdam's series of mini-documentaries that he's calling "12 Days of Occupy."

More echoes of the Occupy movement, planned and spontaneous, are likely to crop up throughout the festival.

For King, who is involved with the massive student-led protests now taking place in Montreal, Infringement is part and parcel of Occupy's progressive philosophy.

His city, King said, is in the midst of an "Infringement in the streets."

"Every night, people are banging on pots and pans, and everyone's wearing these red squares. It's really interesting to see how these corporate festivals are telling the students, 'You better not come here and you better not disrupt our festival,' and the students have created their own festival of resistance on the streets."

The anti-authoritarian Infringement Fest -- whether in Buffalo or Montreal -- thrives on the same ethos that drives those students and local Occupiers.

"It's inclusive because you don't have to pay to play, there's no gatekeeper to keep you away, there's no fees you have to pay that would stop you from playing, there's no corporate sponsor who might be curious to know if your work is critical of them,"

King said of the festival. "It's really this amazing opportunity that doesn't really exist in society, and that's one of the reasons we cooked it up."

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Infringement Festival

WHEN: Thursday through Aug. 5

WHERE: Various locations throughout Allentown and beyond

INFO: **[www.infringebuffalo.org](http://www.infringebuffalo.org)**