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## Feeling free The Buffalo Infringement Festival is back for a third year of making edgy artists right at home

By Colin Dabkowski

Jul 20, 2007

**A**ron Piepszny can't stop moving.

No matter what he's talking about, the 28-year-old dancer's limbs seem possessed by some faraway force, like a voodoo doll hooked up to an electric generator.

His undeniable urge to move has spelled trouble for Piepszny on more than one occasion. Last year, during an ad-hoc mime show at the Taste of Buffalo, police put the kibosh on his performance and told him to beat it. Ditto for last year's Allentown Art Festival, from which Piepszny was kicked out for performing in the street while his friend was confronted by authorities for wearing an extravagant bird costume.

"He almost got hemmed up in a jiffy," Piepszny said, cracking a smile. "They were not feeling his bird vibe at all."

But at this year's Buffalo Infringement Festival, the third and largest incarnation of the annual event yet, all vibes are welcome. The free-spirited Piepszny can perform whatever he wants, and so can hundreds of his fellow edgy and experimental artists.

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With more than 250 performances, theatrical happenings and unclassifiable artistic endeavors, the Infringement Festival has quickly become Western New York's prime concentrated compendium of the diverse and bizarre. At least 130 individual projects will be held at more than 25 venues around Buffalo from Thursday through Aug. 5.

>No restrictions

For Matthew LaChiusa, an active participant in the festival and one of its informal association of organizers, the strength and popularity of the festival stems from its notable lack of rules and restrictions.

"I believe the driving force of the Buffalo Infringement Festival is that it does give the opportunity for artists and producers, playwrights, whatever they may be, an environment to create their passion, their vision, in an environment that doesn't put any artistic reins on it," LaChiusa said. "It allows them to actually create and really do something that may not be normal or may not be traditional in its essence."

Like many festival participants, LaChiusa has his hand in several different Infringement events, including his alt-country band Dick Whiskey, a play he wrote about New Orleans called "Axeman's Jazz" and another play he's directing, Lanford Wilson's "Wandering (A Turn)."

For Piepszny, who will perform at five different venues in completely different styles of dance, an event like the Infringement Festival serves to lighten the yearlong struggle of unorthodox artists without financial backing.

"Logic does not necessarily apply when arts, and things that challenge people's conceptions, are concerned," Piepszny said. "People don't want those preconceptions to be challenged, because it's bad for business."

For festival organizers, the fact that the event has grown so quickly in its three-year existence is proof of a vast and underrepresented contingent of Buffalo artists whose endeavors remain largely out of the spotlight. They are performance artists, fire jugglers, experimental thespians, musicians and puppeteers -- together dubbed "miscellaneous insurrectionists" by festival organizers. The quality of their work can range from dismal to immaculate, a fact that makes the festival all the more unique for its trend-bucking and genuinely democratic nature.

As in years past, Allentown will serve as the nexus of activity for the festival, with events taking place in venues such as Rust Belt Books, the bar Staples, the College Street Gallery, Nietzsche's, Cafe 59 and the surrounding streets, alleys and parking spaces.

To wit: "Shakespeare in the Parking Space," the brainchild of Buffalo performance artist and Infringement organizer Ron Ehmke (known to fans as Ronawanda) and collaborator Brian Milbrand, takes place outside Allen Street Hardware at 10 p.m. Aug. 4. It's free, and participants are encouraged to bring their own scripts, costumes and props.

Across the street, in a tiny courtyard, actors Sandra Jardine and Gary Collins will perform Jardine's sketch "Right Between the Eyes," a lighthearted rumination on the challenges faced by the disabled. The sketch features an encounter between a visually and hearing-impaired girl and the boy who falls for her.

"There are so many people in the world that have disabilities, both obvious and not obvious," Jardine said, positing another definition for "infringement." "We ask ourselves: Who is really infringing upon whom? Is the boy infringing upon her, is she really infringing upon him, and who in the end really has the empowerment?"

>A launching pad

Infringement's empowerment has already begun to extend beyond the festival, serving as a kind of launching pad for artists to broaden their community impact. At last year's festival, actor Kelly Beuth performed with a group called the Brazen-faced Varlets in the lesbian-themed Shakespeare adaptation "Ramona and Juliet." It caused such a stir at the festival that the theater company Buffalo United Artists gave the group a two-week run last December, and Beuth later won an Artvoice Artie Award for outstanding supporting actress.

"It was exciting to try something out and actually have it grow in scale," Beuth said. "I was shocked and amazed."

This year, the Varlets will perform "A Midsummer Dyke's Dream," another original adaptation written for the group by playwright Sean Northrip. Beuth will also present a children's theater piece with students from Buffalo's Academy of Visual and Performing Arts called "Hold Your A'Paws" to raise money for the Wyoming County SPCA.

Another play performed at last year's Infringement Festival also went on to garner wider recognition. David Rabe's "Hurlyburly," directed by Chris Standart at last year's festival and eventually reprised at the Adam Mickiewicz Library and Dramatic Circle, will be followed at this year's festival by Rabe's less renowned prequel, "Those the River Keeps." But it's not all about drama. The Infringement purview encompasses plenty of live music, featuring dozens of bands in a series of showcases at Soundlab, Hallwalls, Merlin's, Staples and Nietzsche's. And though those bands include plenty of straight-laced rock, a good sampling of them embody just the sort of extraterrestrial vibe the festival was created to foster.

Take Jack Topht with the Vegetables. The duo, consisting of local singer Topht and his girlfriend Lindsey Lemberski, performs wry, satirical songs with titles like "Your God Is Your Stomach" and "Pants Smuggler." Lemberski simultaneously plays drums and keyboards while Topht sings and raps logorrheic stream of consciousness rants. Occasionally, when the spirit moves her, Lemberski screams.

During a recent interview, Lemberski wore a bright yellow dress stenciled with hearts and draped with a homemade boa of green felt. She said she still had flecks of paint on her body from a recent art project in which she had smeared herself with blue paint and proceeded to make a stamp of her body in the grass. She pointed to a vaguely corporeal blue smudge on her lawn. Her explanation: "I wanted to exercise my right to be blue." Topht said that it's not hard for offbeat bands like his to exercise their right to play offbeat music in town. ("If you've got 10 friends that like to drink that'll come out and support you, you can be fairly successful."), but he appreciates the increased exposure afforded by the festival and the opportunity for a vast array of artists to ingest the band's material.

"I think it's a great model," Topht said of the Infringement system. "It's celebrating all the creative people in your community and not turning any of them away."

Josh Smith, a self-styled impresario of Buffalo's underrepresented comedic and musical talent who has dubbed himself "The R-Rated Rockstar," will present a number of artists under his fledgling artistic coalition "29-Cent Productions." More than simply a new outlet, Smith sees the festival as a way to combat what he sees as a staggering lack of respect for Buffalo's comedic talent. Smith will present, among others, the singer and acoustic guitarist Pat O'Keefe, who sings irreverent songs like "TK."

The Infringement Festival Web site, **[infringebuffalo.org](http://infringebuffalo.org)**, will contain a constantly updated schedule of events. Last year's festival saw some midstream cancellations and shufflings, and the same can be expected this time around.

Piepszny, who is thrilled at the opportunity to perform in free venues with zero artistic oversight, said that the festival's in-your-face self-image is somewhat necessarily disingenuous, but still manages to capture what for many artists is a constant state of creating art outside the mainstream.

"Infringement is cool like that, but to say, 'Here's the infringement,' it's not an infringement because it's planned. I am the Infringement Festival. My bird friend? He is the Infringement Festival. Infringement all year long."

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**WHAT:** Buffalo Infringement Festival

**WHEN:** Thursday through Aug. 5

**WHERE:** Various venues, mostly in Allentown

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