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Getting to the bottom of the Infringement Festival

By Colin Dabkowski

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Kathrine Roberts, of Lackawanna, painting a hoop during the 2014 Buffalo Infringement Festival. (Buffalo News file photo)

By BN

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For an event now in its 10th year, the 11-day **Buffalo Infringement Festival** is still a source of confusion for many Western New Yorkers.

Why, the casual Allentown visitor might reasonably ask, is a man dressed in a banana suit declaiming poetry to a small group of scraggly onlookers outside of Nietzsche's? What could possibly be the intent of the person in a red bodysuit and cardboard helmet doing jumping jacks on the front yard of the Burchfield Penney Art Center? And what of the Meatloafesque guitarist **performing shirtless** on top of his car in the driveway of Casa de Arte?

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What indeed.

The chief joy and central challenge of the Infringement Festival, launched locally in 2005 as a largely theater-based endeavor and now featuring hundreds of performances across 11 days, is that it is so big and diverse as to be practically unknowable.

So every year when people ask me what Infringement is – and why I see it as the most important arts festival in the region – I have a few dozen different answers for them.

It's true the Infringement Festival is a bastion of cultural oddities which can be perplexing to consumers of more traditional culture. Yes, it contains its share of unlistenable music and mediocre art, its share of weirdness masquerading as innovation and its share of style over substance.

But beneath that patina of outward strangeness, Infringement is also something more serious, and more heartening.

Infringement is traffic slowing to a crawl along Grant Street as Michele Costa unfurls a hand-painted scroll depicting Alabama's Freedom Riders as part of her **stunning commemoration** of the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. It's a little girl in the crowd asking who the girl in Costa's painting was, and Costa explaining that it was Ruby Bridges, the first black student to attend a formerly all-white elementary school in the South.

Infringement is the musician and onetime Buffalo School Board candidate Daniel Reynolds, who plays a half-dozen instruments but could afford only one cord to connect them to his amp, performing with a young girl he'd taught to beatbox extraordinarily well in the back room of Rust Belt Books to the astonishment of the crowd.

Infringement is the fierce talent of Buffalo actress **Kathleen Betsko Yale**, who retired earlier this year from full stage productions after a career-capping performance at the Irish Classical Theatre Company, during a reading of Frank Canino's harrowing play "**Hecuba Again**" that left the crowd in awe.

Infringement is local actor Vanessa Webb **decked out in full Queen Elizabeth regalia**, giving the crowd in the Karpeles Manuscript Library on Porter Avenue a fascinating, tongue-in-cheek look into the sexual politics of her era and ours.

Infringement is one extremely happy guy dancing in the front yard of the Nickel City Housing Co-Op to an interpretation of the Eurythmics' "Sweet Dreams" by Erica Wolfling, who later smiled out at him **from under her Viking helmet** and uttered this nugget of truth: "If you just make one person dance, it's worth it."

In short, Infringement is a collection of thousands of little moments of creativity – some half-realized, some full-fledged – that happen all year long in basements, garages and studios out of the public eye.

It is an attempt to mine the vast creative underground of Western New York in search of rare and hidden gems, the discovery of which imbues the seeker with a deep sense of accomplishment and the creator with the courage to continue.

Infringement, because of its egalitarian nature, is a crucial way to sidestep the institutions that decide what kinds of cultural expression we get to see. It's a way around curators or artistic directors' sometimes narrow ideas about approved forms of creative expression and an argument that the **gestures we make toward art** can be as worthy of consideration as the final product.

Infringement is not a repudiation of Western New York's fine and progressive arts institutions or their methods of selecting what we see, but an admission that the institutional process can never be perfect and leaves behind a great deal of worthwhile creative activity. And the fact that so much of that activity is laid out before us every July and August is one of the great cultural accomplishments of this region.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the culture-seekers of Buffalo:
Infringement is running for **one more day**.

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