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Theater of the absurd Almost nothing artistically is off limits at the Buffalo Infringement Festival

By Colin Dabkowski

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The cars slowed to a crawl as they rounded the bend at Allen and Wadsworth streets. Baffled drivers peered over their steering wheels and into the crowded Days Park, trying hard to discern why a young man with a can attached to his mouth was pounding xylophone mallets into a powder-blue suitcase contraption strapped to his stomach.

Those who slowed for long enough managed to catch a few lines of dialogue from the wandering street-theater performance of Bertolt Brecht's "The Exception and the Rule," part of the third annual Buffalo Infringement Festival.

Over the course of an hour, the show's motley crowd of onlookers blended into the cast as the production roved swiftly from one street corner or parking lot to the next and the Subversive Theatre Collective performance wove its way through the nooks and crannies of Allentown.

It was just one of more than 25 performances on Sunday's installment of the festival, an 11-day collection of odd, underground, too-cool-for-school and otherwise extraterrestrial art and theater.

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Kurt Schneiderman, one of the festival's planners and artistic director of the Subversive Theatre Collective, could barely suppress a grin at the close of "The Exception and the Rule," which finished off on the steps of the Karpeles Manuscript Museum at the corner of Elmwood Avenue and North Street.

"I'm pretty blown away," Schneiderman said. "This was such a complete shot in the dark. You didn't know what a live audience was going to do."

The sizable live audience, it turned out, loved the hour-long show and followed it during Sunday's sweltering heat to eight separate locations.

Rebekah Williams, an Allentown resident who trudged happily along with the theater production, said that she felt it represented the festival's goal of exposing Buffalo's underground scene to the light of day.

"I felt like we had to work, too, and experience what he experienced," said Williams, referring to a character in the play who was forced to carry heavy bags during a long expedition.

Sated with the show, the crowd dispersed to partake in the rest of the off-beat offerings of the bohemian event. Attendees were faced with an embarrassment of strange riches to choose from on this day, including hip-hop dance performances, a half-dozen plays, several bands and a collection of lively and colorful characters whose mere existence qualified them as exhibits.

Organizers of the College Street Block Party, which has taken place annually apart from the Infringement Festival for the last five years, chose to jump onto the Infringement wagon this year. With at least six bands, food, live artistic installations and a healthy amount of frenzied dancing, the daylong block party served as the perfect stopover between events at Staples bar, the College Street Gallery, Rust Belt Books and the streets and alleys of Allentown themselves.

At the block party, the eclectic rock outfit Global Village Idiots caused some riotous dancing to break out on the closed-off street, and revelers on foot and bicycle freely partook of brown-bagged beverages under the intense sun. Stephen Reynolds, a local artist, was hard at work painting a huge canvas propped up against a tree. For him, the lack of ubiquitous street festival standbys like major sponsors and official exhibitor booths creates a more open and creative atmosphere.

"It's a blend of like-minded people," Reynolds said. "There's no corporate people for you to sign up to get e-mails from. I'm just here to mix with good people and listen to good music."

Down the street, 35 people crammed into the sweltering back room of Rust Belt Books, the festival's de facto theater epicenter, to watch "Concerto," a performance from puppeteer, mime and actor Michele Costa. The crowd was delighted as Costa produced a practically endless assortment of puppets, painted scrolls of paper and other hand-crafted surprises from an intricately decorated octagonal box. Costa said she created this show of puppetry specifically for the small Rust Belt space.

"I try to be clear and concise by just showing a simple image or a simple movement and really getting a lot of expression and emotion out of that very simplistic emotional element," Costa said in an interview before the festival. "They're little stories and they each feature a character and their relationships to other people, other beings or just aloneness."

In contrast to Costa's subtle and solitary endeavor, the Montreal-based interactive theater troupe "Car Stories" turns audience members into actors. Troupe founder Donovan King, who traveled to Buffalo along with three other members of the group, stressed that audience members -- taken in groups of three at half-hour intervals on an interactive expedition through the streets of Allentown -- are not merely spectators. They are, King said, "spect-actors" whose participation in the show makes it what it is.

"It's almost like 'Alice in Wonderland.' You never know what to expect," King said. "Sometimes, it causes a theatrical tear in the urban fabric." Asked to explain, King recalled one "Car Stories" performance involving a staged bank robbery during which an alarmed onlooker called the police. The theatrical experiment, which was kicked out of the larger Montreal Fringe Festival in 2001, served as the basis for the creation of the "hands-off" Infringement Festival model, which has since spread to a handful of cities around the world.

Sunday night's incarnation of the event, led by Donovan and his cohorts along with several Buffalo-based performers, was inspired by a recent article in Artvoice suggesting that the festival pay artists for their work. After explaining the rules of the performance, King, in character, explained to participants that they would be auditioning for musical theater maven Andrew Lloyd Webber in order to raise the necessary funds. After a series of whimsical digressions -- including a frightening session with a flesh-eating alien in the back seat of a parked car -- the "spect-actors" were each assigned roles from musicals like "Evita" and "The Wizard of Oz" and instructed to act and sing them out while traipsing around the neighborhood. Good fun -- if not good acting -- seemed to be had by all.

The Infringement (including one last performance of "Car Stories" starting at 6 p.m. tonight) continues until Sunday in venues around the city. Constant scheduling updates, along with a blog chronicling recent happenings, can be found at the festival's Web site, **infringebuffalo.org**.

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