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Controlled chaos Artists plunge into the Infringement Festival, a mind-bending exercise in creative freedom

By Colin Dabkowski

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The Buffalo Infringement Festival made its first humble appearance in Allentown only four years ago. This year, the festival is sprung from its home neighborhood and its theater-based roots and will include more than 300 separate projects and 600 individual performances from bands, impromptu theater troupes and artists of all stripes at 50 venues over the span of 11 days.

If all those planned projects go off without a hitch -- though some of them, by virtue of the festival's happily chaotic nature, may not -- Buffalo's Infringement Fest will have doubled in size since last year's incarnation when it kicks off on Thursday.

Buffalo's version of the festival (it was founded in Montreal in 2001) continues to draw many artists whose work rarely, if ever, receives a platform for public display. It's always filled with bizarre characters, eclectic performances and an artistic free spirit that the city's more well-oiled and official festivals are hard-pressed to replicate.

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For an undertaking so huge and growing so explosively, defining its ethos in any concrete way is kind of a fool's errand. Infringement is cool precisely because it is so tough to pin down, so malleable and -- if the last three years are any indication -- so explosively popular. Quality is another story entirely, and like any festival, the pendulum can swing widely between the cringe-inducing and genuinely soul-shattering.

"The glory of this festival is that some of the people involved in it have been making theater or making visual art or music for their entire professional lives," said festival co-organizer Ron Ehmke, who will present his tried-and-true projects "Self-Infringement" and "Shakespeare in the Parking Lot." "Other people are in many cases still in high school or this is the first art project they've ever done."

And that's the beauty of it.

But at least one thing about Infringement Festival is certain. It was founded as a kind of underground franchise operation, in opposition to the more mainstream "Fringe" festivals held in cities around the world. It has definite anti-establishment undertones and its artists are bound together by a sense of opposition to traditional art.

To get a sense of the festival's transgressive roots, a few of this year's participants took a stab at explaining just what, exactly, they're planning to infringe upon.

>It's a game

Morgan Calhoon, a graduate student in the University at Buffalo's School of Visual Studies, has turned her love of games into new kind of art.

Calhoon's interactive project is a scavenger hunt. Teams of participants will traipse around Allentown, following a trail of clues Calhoon has left in storefronts and other neighborhood nooks and crannies. Each clue instructs the team members to engage

in some strange activity, take a picture of it with a cell phone and send it to Calhoon, who compiles all the pictures for an award ceremony at the end of the festival. As for infringing? Calhoon said her project is designed to transgress all kinds of norms.

"I think it definitely breaks some people's personal boundaries. Someone you don't know is asking you to take a picture in a pose that they might have suggested to you, and most of the people say yes, surprisingly," Calhoon said. "There are some people who say no, but for the most part they're willing to pretend to steal books or pretend to act like they're flying like a superhero."

The project is part of Calhoon's research for her master's thesis project, which she said will attempt to "trick" people into becoming more involved in the life of their city using games as enticement.

"I love games, I like the boundaries they break with people," Calhoon said. "I like that people act outside themselves with games. I like that calling it a game makes people do things they would never do."

>Who's manipulated?

Michele Costa is a puppeteer. During her packed performance in the tiny hotbox of Rust Belt Books at last year's festival, Costa skillfully drew a series of strange items out of an octagonal box of curiosities in an engrossing mini-play called "Concerto." This year, she'll present a puppet performance, which she excerpted during a pre-fest preview at Sample, an Allentown restaurant.

Her performance, she said, "infringes" on the public's preconceptions of what puppetry is supposed to do. Her work, which tends toward the dark and mysterious, is a far cry from the Muppets of "Sesame Street," "Fraggle Rock," even the impromptu sock puppet shows taking place in playrooms the world over. Some of Costa's puppets can take on movements lifelike enough to play tricks on even the most grounded imaginations.

"It's about the manipulated and the manipulator," Costa said. "Who's being manipulated?" With Costa's performances, the line between puppet and puppeteer is blurred -- and therein lies the infringement.

>Bitter campaign

Local musician and anti-political agitator Paul Painkiller is one of those countless Infringement artists whose project defies tidy classification. It is essentially a mock political speech in the style of the Onion, in which Painkiller dons a ski mask and holds up a cardboard placard with the word "NOBODY" scrawled across it in magic marker.

"A lot of people across this country believe that nobody lives in Western New York, and nobody does," Painkiller's speech begins. "I should know because I am nobody, and I'm running for president of the United States."

Ask Painkiller what he's infringing on and the answer is hardly surprising: what he views as the failure of government at all levels to deal with social and environmental problems. Painkiller, rest assured, is not by any means a lone wolf among other artists in a decidedly left-leaning festival.

>Rock star

Also in the mold of Painkiller, local poet and comedian Josh Smith is unabashedly fed up with the status quo. But where Painkiller's message is on politics, Smith takes the local arts and music scenes to task. His organization, dubbed Twenty-Nine Cent Productions, will present five separate multimedia performances, each featuring a different poet, musician and comedian culled from the ranks of Buffalo's disparate underground arts scenes.

"The comedy scene in Buffalo has almost been blinked out of existence. The poetry scene in Buffalo is on a very slippery slope, and the music scene is so oversaturated that we pay homage to the banal and we forget the exceptional," said Smith, who calls himself the Rated-R Rockstar.

>A long weekend

And sometimes -- in fact in most cases -- the infringement can be a more subtle matter of taking an unorthodox approach to a project.

That's the plan for Scott Andrew Kurchak, one of the festival's local founders and an actor and playwright. Kurchak will present the play "Byrdbrain," an hourlong piece about a teacher whose students lock him in a school closet for a long weekend.

Because he will direct himself, Kurchak said that the project will go against the normal way of executing a one-man show. This way, Kurchak can claim full responsibility for the project and execute it without any oversight from a director. And that kind of freedom is at the heart of the Infringement Festival.

"I'm kind of separating myself in the director and actor jobs. And so far so good," Kurchak said. "It's a very personal project. The motivation goes back to pure storytelling. And it's how I want to tell the story."

For a full schedule of the Infringement Fest lineup, visit **infringebuffalo.org**.

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