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Creative license; The Infringement Festival is two weeks of art, theater and music without rules, without borders, without budgets and without excuses

By Colin Dabkowski

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The rotating team of organizers behind the annual Infringement Festival, Buffalo's two-week free-for-all of offbeat art, theater and music, has a pretty simple credo.

As the festival's Web site attests, organizers believe that "exciting art can happen anywhere, anytime, without a blockbuster budget. (Or any budget at all, for that matter.)"

At a time when complaints about skimpy arts funding have reached a fever pitch, the hundreds of artists who will perform at venues around the city from Thursday through Aug. 1 are making a statement that's practically revolutionary: We don't need no stinkin' money. We can produce great art out of thin air. Oh, and also? Rules are for chumps.

That's precisely the philosophy that local Infringement Fest participants have been following since 2005, when the Montreal-based festival made its first appearance in Buffalo. Since then, it's grown into a city-spanning behemoth of unbridled creative activity that draws more performers and exhibitors into its fold each summer.

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The festival's "opening ceremonies" will get under way at 7 p.m. Thursday at Nietzsche's (248 Allen St.) with an evening of musical performances from local performers and bands including Buffalo People, MC Vendetta, Ben Miller, DJ Horrific Dissonance, Lara Buckley and the Albrights.

The annual subcultural extravaganza is a chance for established artists like artist/performer Ron Ehmke, outfits such as Squeaky Wheel Media Arts Center and Subversive Theatre Collective and other artists looking for a no-risk venue to step outside their own boundaries to join total neophytes and recently arrived residents looking for a way to break into the local arts scene.

One of those newcomers is Caitlin Cass, a Chicago transplant who is in Buffalo to get her master's degree at the University at Buffalo. For her project, Cass will station herself at a table and encourage visitors to bring a book, which she'll use to draw a comic that visitors can then take home with them. Infringement-goers can find Cass doing her thing next Friday at 6 p.m. at the Western New York Book Arts Center (468 Washington St.), at 12 p.m. July 25 at the Broadway Market (999 Broadway) and on July 28 from 1 to 5 p.m. at the Crane Library (633 Elmwood Ave.).

"I make a lot of comics about Western civilization and philosophy and literature and stuff, so it just seemed like a fun, interactive way to do that, but also to be able to meet people and talk to them," Cass said. At the library, she added, "I'll run into people who wouldn't normally even think to read comics."

That's also the sort of cross-cultural fusion the performance artist and musician known as Kendall is hoping for. Known for his outrageous performances and drag acts, first-time Infringer Kendall has lately been delving into experimental video. He'll show the first section of his latest project, "Elevator Machine Room," at 7 p.m. July 27 at Squeaky Wheel Performing Arts Center (712 Main St.).

Because he's used to performing for an audience that's very specific -- and often very inebriated -- Kendall is relishing the opportunity to present work to a new audience.

"With [drag] performing, you have three minutes and everyone's drunk in the room," Kendall said. "I learned how to kind of wrap whatever ideas I was trying to get across socially or politically in a package that everyone understood really quickly and was really entertained by. With this, I'm going backward a little bit, and I'm really happy about that -- not having to put it in that context."

For Kilissa Cissoko, Infringement provides a space to hone her project, a work-in-progress called "JFK: The Musical" based on her experience in an airport after her flight to Germany was egregiously delayed in 2008. Cissoko presented some rough drafts of songs from the musical at last year's festival and will conduct more workshops at 7 p.m. July 26 and 27 in the Gateway Gallery (141 Elmwood Ave.).

"I think people will enjoy having a chance to see the creative process, and it'll allow me to try out some new ideas," Cissoko said. "Infringement gives everybody a lot of sympathetic vibration."

Along with the hundreds of newcomers at this year's festival, there are also plenty of Infringement veterans taking the opportunity to try out some new tricks.

Infringement Fest regular Ehmke, though he's taken a step back from his traditional organizational role this year, will lead three guided tours of Allentown full of "personal stories, public secrets and outright lies" next Friday, July 28 and Aug. 1. (See the Infringement Festival Web site for details.) Innovative musician and rapper Jack Topht (representative quote: "I have like three MySpaces, so I'm obviously

pretty important") will perform spoken-word, some self-described "awesome rap" and his very specific brand of pop tuneage with partner Lindsey Lemberski at various spaces during the festival.

Squeaky Wheel's annual Outdoor Animation Festival happens to fall into the Infringement fold this year. It will present a collection of films called "The Great Disaster" at 8 p.m. July 24 in Days Park (at Wadsworth and Allen streets) and a series of stop-motion films at the same place and time July 31. The Subversive Theatre Collective will present Bertolt Brecht's "The Mother" in its Manny Fried Playhouse (255 Great Arrow Ave.) next Friday through Aug. 1, with all shows starting at 8 p.m.

More than 100 bands -- all booked and organized by the fest's music czar Curt Rotterdam -- will populate this year's festival, making up by far the largest segment of the offerings. These include the Bloodthirsty Vegans (featuring Janna Willoughby, aka MC Vendetta), Ramforinkus, the Global Village Idiots and a long list of newcomers.

The artists and organizations detailed in this article represent only a thin sliver of the creative energy that will course through this year's festival. But Infringement's hugeness -- its ineffability -- is part of its rising appeal.

Infringers, taking their cue from Kurt Schneiderman of the Subversive Theatre Collective, who launched the fest in Buffalo, believe deeply that art doesn't need to be presented in a slick little package with a pretty bow on top. It can be raw. It can be undisciplined. It can be transcendent without being polished to a glimmering sheen. And, of course, along with all that, it can also be pretty godawful.

But that's a chance this city's growing base of Infringement Fest fans are willing to take. For them, a dive into the unknown and unproven can yield sights, sounds and ideas that would never make it through the traditional channels. The festival is an acknowledgment that the supposed virtues of self-promotion, organization and even personal ambition that allow artists to slip into the mainstream are useless measures of artistic quality.

The system, Infringers say, rewards business acumen and marketing savvy over personal creativity and presents the art-going public with a seriously skewed notion of what Western New York artists are creating. Infringement is an attempt, unwieldy though it may be, to remove that filter, drag the garage-band drummers and unknown playwrights of Western New York out of obscurity and in front of an eager audience.

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The sixth annual Infringement Festival runs from Thursday through Aug. 1 at venues throughout the city, though it is largely centered in Allentown. The festival includes music, visual art, film, video, performance art, theater, dance and mashups of several disciplines. A full listing of the festival performances, which number in the hundreds and are subject to change at any time, is available online at **www.infringebuffalo.org**.

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News Arts Writer Colin Dabkowski will be blogging the entire Infringement Festival - - complete with photos, videos and short interviews with participating artists -- on the Artsbeat blog. Check out our ongoing Infringement Festival coverage online at **www.buffalonews.com**.