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Infringement fest goes to edinburgh

By Colin Dabkowski

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When organizers of the mammoth arts event known as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe invited Donovan King to their recent conference of global Fringe festivals in Scotland, they had no idea what they were signing up for.

They surely knew that King, who founded the Montreal Infringement Festival in 2004 and later helped export that event to Buffalo, is perhaps the world's most outspoken critic of the hundreds of festivals around the world that are based on Edinburgh's Fringe. They likely knew that he has committed a big part of his life to fighting against the modern Fringe fest model, which he and his collaborators view as too heavily influenced by corporations, too expensive for artists and antithetical to the values of its own founders.

But they probably didn't expect him to set up shop at his table wearing a sinister "V for Vendetta" mask, to proselytize so openly for the open-access Infringement Festival model that's become so popular in Buffalo or to speak up so loudly and consistently against the very festival that had invited him to the conference.

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Nor, I am positive, did they expect King to distribute dozens of copies of the Buffalo Infringement schedule and a Gusto cover story on the Buffalo Infringement Festival in which he figured prominently, nor to induce gasps from the assembled crowd by sarcastically suggesting the Edinburgh Fringe name itself after a multibillion dollar corporation.

King is the dictionary definition of a rabble-rouser. His consistently amusing dispatches from the World Fringe Congress, compiled on his website at **www.optative.net**, comprise a powerful chronicle of one man's perhaps quixotic attempt to fight the power and to insert his own radical viewpoint into the conversation. (In addition to which, it is frequently hilarious: "When I met the Lord Provost, the Right Honourable Donald Wilson," King wrote of his introduction to the mayor of Edinburgh, "I shook his hand, introduced myself, and told him about the infringement festival, joking that maybe it would appear in Edinburgh one day. He chuckled and directed me to the free glasses of wine.")

But the thing is that King's ideas really aren't radical, or at least shouldn't be. They go to the heart of why we have freedom of expression in the first place and speak directly to the true power of art. His argument - that more corporate sponsorship and more cultural gate-keeping robs Fringe artists of their agency to bring about social and political change - ought to be a no-brainer.

That it is not, has worked to the advantage of Buffalonians, who get to have the totally open-source Infringement Festival (which welcomed more than 800 individual performances this summer) with none of the pesky problems associated with a traditional "Fringe" festival. King's trip to Edinburgh to plant the seeds of dissent in the place where the Fringe was born is an unexpected development that has already resulted in the minting of a new Infringement Festival in Ipswich.

King left Edinburgh with some key questions:

"Did I get my message across about the need to safeguard the Fringe-proper, or is the once-ethereal Fringe doomed to be endlessly co-opted by corporate interests and overzealous administrators? Is it destined to be locked into structures that favour corporations and bureaucrats over artists, especially those who struggle just to make ends meet?"

In Edinburgh, the questions remain. But in Buffalo, where Infringement has grown into the region's most active and diverse annual festival, the answer is already clear.

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