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Infringement Fest is full of surprises

By Colin Dabkowski

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And here I thought I'd seen it all.

Today marks the 11th and final day in Buffalo's annual Infringement Festival, a pan-artistic free-for-all that slots hundreds of underexposed artists into dozens of local venues and invites the public to watch the unpredictable results.

Since I began covering the festival in 2007, I've seen a seemingly endless parade of strange and often gloriously unclassifiable performances, ranging from the Brechtian agitprop theater of the Subversive Theatre Collective and Michele Costa's spellbinding experiments in puppetry to the evolving work of the gifted musical shape-shifter Jack Topht and the tech-infused poetic inventions of Geoffrey Peters.

This year alone, it wasn't uncommon to see a man wearing a hard hat with a built-in guitar amp wandering around Allentown and serenading stunned passers-by with intricate passages played on a custom-made 12-string guitar. Or to stumble across J. Tim Raymond, who set up on various street corners to create chalk mandala sidewalk drawings set to improvised musical accompaniment.

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But this summer, as in past years, the Infringement Fest retained its innate ability to surprise even the veteran Infringer. What follows are a few of my favorite and sometimes least-expected moments of Infringement 2011.

* Offerings of poetry at Infringement, as with every other medium, are a mixed bag. So when I attended an evening of burlesque performances and "erotic" poetry at Nietzsche's on Wednesday night, I adjusted my expectations appropriately. These were promptly shattered when I heard the work of Marina Blithsteyn, a Soviet-born Williamsville native now in Columbia University's poetry master's program. Though much of what she read that night is unprintable here, it struck my ears as uncommonly wise, versed in equal parts experience and reading, and also somehow irresistibly lyrical. A huge, delightful surprise.

* Also a surprise: The fact that Buffalo has, at minimum, five active burlesque troupes. This form of old in recent years has been undergoing a revival -- sometimes tinged with nostalgia, sometimes with a certain brand of neofeminist critique, often with both. I saw a tongue-in-cheek performance of Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" performed by a group known as the Boom Boom Betties. Suffice to say, it lived up to its title. The fact that the evening also featured troupes Hell's Harlots, the Zombettes (who, naturally, perform in zombie makeup), the Stripteasers and the Beau Fleuzies speaks to the burlesque movement's hold in Western New York.

* I'm a skeptic by nature, so I was prepared to take Janna Willoughby's storytelling performance "Weird Tales and Tall Coincidences (Part II)" with a big grain of salt. Whether I left the hourlong performance believing Willoughby's stories of divine

intervention, or whether I agreed with the idea that her mother's spirit was capable of causing a rainstorm, is beside the point. Along with the rest of the audience in the small art space **SP@CE** 224 on Allen Street, I was deeply affected by Willoughby's harrowing story about the dual losses of her mother and brother, and her ability to remain unfailingly optimistic in the face of events that would reduce most of us to smoldering wrecks.

The list could go on and on. While the Infringement Festival gestalt is, of course, inextricably tied up with the bizarre, its true power lies in its ability to excavate universally affecting art from the swirling local underground. And for some, who may have thought they had Infringement pegged as a showcase for the merely mediocre, that may be the biggest surprise of all.

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