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Infringement Festival offers ? abundant, diverse surprises

By Colin Dabkowski

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Tonight, after 11 days of torrential artistic activity that consumed Allentown and spread to dozens of venues across the city, the eighth annual Buffalo Infringement Festival will draw to a close.

It has been a wild ride.

This year's festival was the largest and most expansive yet, with more than 800 performances – from fire-twirling hula-hoopers, struggling garage bands, veteran puppeteers, part-time comedians, first-time actors, storytellers, street poets, concrete poets and neo-Beat poets.

There is no doubt that Infringement, the Montreal-born affair launched locally in 2005 by Subversive Theatre founder Kurt Schneiderman, has grown into one of the city's most significant cultural phenomena. Anyone who applies before the deadline is accepted, a fact that earns the festival respect from some for its democratic nature and derision from others for its inherently scattershot nature.

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Unlike other festivals that are curated and programmed by a committee of tastemakers, the worth of the Infringement free-for-all lies not in the overall quality of the work presented under its umbrella. Instead, its true virtues lie in that work's diversity, its sheer abundance and – perhaps most importantly – its insistence on expanding our notions about what qualifies as art.

This year, the inherently political festival has taken on especially pronounced political overtones. Before the Occupy movement officially materialized last year, Infringement already embodied its values. This year, the stamp of Occupy Buffalo was everywhere apparent at Infringement, from sign art used during the movement's months-long stand in Niagara Square to theater performances featuring Occupy members.

It would be impossible for any one person to experience the full breadth of Infringement, but what follows are some highlights from my Infringement experience thus far. More of those moments can be found on The Gusto Blog at **buffalonews.com**. Here are a few that stuck out:

* Buffalo, like any city anywhere, is oversupplied with singer-songwriters. But I encountered two, Peter Sorkin and Keith Michaud, whose sidewalk performances were especially addictive. Sorkin, a recent Buffalo transplant, accompanied himself impressively on slide guitar on an original tongue-in-cheek tune called "The Residential Treatment Facility Blues." Michaud, playing a set outside Rust Belt Books on Friday afternoon, reminded me of Lowest of the Low's Ron Hawkins as he strummed away on his own original song, "The Ghost of New Orleans."

* Burning Books, a radical bookstore on Connecticut Street, hosted a hilarious performance of a short play called "Reader's Theater," in which two actors put on patrician British accents and read from source material including a teenager's diary and an antiquated instruction book on how to be a proper wife. This came from The Honesty Theatre, a company which, fortunately for our theater scene, recently relocated from Batavia to Buffalo.

* In The Foundry, a space that once belonged to Buffalo ReUse and is soon to become the home of a shared artisan workspace run by Net Positive, Torn Space Theater mounted a gloriously strange production of Leonid Andreyev's play "He Who Gets Slapped." One of the highlights of the festival is the opportunity it presents to see reimagined spaces that artists across the city have begun to reactivate in surprising ways.

* In the small, sweaty back room of Rust Belt Books, Bourbon and Coffee presented a set of jazz and poetry that was suffused with contemporary politics and, stylistically, a throwback to what I imagine readings from some Beat poets were like back in the day.

* Montreal Infringement Festival founder Donovan King's "Occupy Theatre!" event in Nietzsche's brought together Infringers and Occupiers for an open mic featuring strange songs, stories and other performances that neatly captured the shared ethos of both organizations.

* Finally, as is usually the case during any Infringement Festival, the very best moments came unexpectedly on walks up and down Allen Street. In Allentown, the nerve center of Infringement, events both planned and random took place every afternoon and evening in the streets and in venues whose open doors allowed the sound of poetry readings, acoustic performances and storytelling sessions to drift out.

On one evening, I stumbled across an artist doing mandala chalk drawings on the sidewalk, a man dressed as a hot dog delivering a story to a rapt crowd and finally an impromptu performance by the local band Clandestina y La Raza Cosmica outside of a bar at the edge of the neighborhood.

The sense of constant surprise, of being attuned to whatever kind of art might be happening at the moment and of letting it wash over you until you're ready to move on to the next surprise – that is the key to Infringement and part of what makes the festival indispensable.

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