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The festival that infringes (brilliantly!) on expectations

By Colin Dabkowski

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Today marks the final day of the Buffalo Infringement Festival, an epic 11-day all-you-can-eat buffet of underexposed theater, dance, visual art and music staged in spaces large and small across the city.

It has been a wild and rewarding ride for participants and audiences alike, and one that made an important statement not only about the importance of Buffalo's vast creative underground, but also about the way we present art in general.

Most of our established summer festivals, which pack the calendar from June to September, are relatively passive affairs. You've got your fried dough stands, your massive beer tents, your seven blocks of white tents along a predetermined stretch of asphalt. All the faithful participant has to do is walk around and soak it all in.

This widespread approach, which thrives on familiarity and convenience, accounts for much of what makes Buffalo such a bastion of breathless activity in the summer months. But for some, it comes at the expense of authenticity and promotes a (sometimes false) sense that the art these festivals contain is constrained by festival committees and application requirements.

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The Infringement Festival is something altogether different. Each summer, it turns Buffalo into a labyrinth of artistic activity ripe for exploration. It asks participants to seek out art, music and theater in strange and unexpected places, like the rooftop of the Broadway Market or the backyard patios and pocket gardens of Allentown. And it rewards the ambitious participant with new and unexpected experiences -- the thrill of discovering the artistic undercurrent coursing through a city we only thought we knew.

I like to think of Infringement as an artistic scavenger hunt, a game where the only rule is to push the boundaries of your own taste. Here are few highlights from the first days of the festival, which account only for a minuscule slice of what it has offered so far:

Accomplished puppeteer Michele Costa performed her new show, "The Edge of Here," at the Crane Library and in Rust Belt Books. She's become something of an Infringement Festival institution, and her show deftly combined puppetry, music, storytelling and painting to tell a wistful and compelling story about the Rust Belt mind-set.

"Shape of States," also known as Geoffrey Peters, performed a 15-minute set of "glitch poetry" on the back patio of **SP@CE 224**, a small gallery space on Allen Street. I had no idea what "glitch poetry" was until I heard Peters' performance of spoken-word poetry looped and modulated through his latter-day vocoder. I'm glad I did.

"The Mother," a play by Bertolt Brecht, received a fascinating interactive production by the Subversive Theatre Collective in its Manny Fried Playhouse. There were no seats, with audience members playing parts and serving as props. It was an effective

way to make a political play that could have been tedious consistently engaging and a heck of a lot of fun.

The College Street Block Party (held last Sunday), which predates the Infringement Festival by some years, is simply a bunch of bands playing on a small stretch of College Street. But the crowd that attends -- a mix of hipsters and young families, tripped-out hippies and local business owners -- shows the strange brew of sensibilities that the Infringement Festival is out to cultivate.

Brief looks at art shows at the Cosmopolitan Gallery (in what looks to be an old bar on a bleak stretch of Genesee Street), **SP@CE** 224, the Gateway Gallery, Indigo Art, the Western New York Book Arts Center, Sugar City and elsewhere show that the visual arts component of the festival is growing year after year.

Busking has been a big factor in the festival this year, and a walk down Allen Street on any afternoon of the week was sure to boast an amusing assortment of street musicians, mime acts, pieces of guerrilla theater and unclassifiable art installations.

As I write this column, there are still six days of the festival to go and already hundreds of performances have taken place. If you're reading this on Sunday morning, there's still a chance to catch the festival-ending "Broadway Market Rooftop Extravaganza," which starts at noon with the 1 2/8 Path Band, features an array of theater, dance and art installations, and wraps up at 7:30 with a performance by The Tins.

As another year of the Infringement Festival winds down, its organizers can be confident that they've properly honored the thousands of underexposed artists working in Western New York year-round, minted brand-new audiences and, perhaps most importantly, added something of immeasurable value to Buffalo's loaded landscape of summer festivals.

e-mail: [**cdabkowski@buffnews.com**](mailto:cdabkowski@buffnews.com)