



Urban Times

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on making it better in 2007

From NOVEMBER 2006:

Tweaking the Fringe: Thoughts from the audience and performers

A THOUSAND PEOPLE OR SO CAME to Mass Ave on Sunday, Sept. 3 – the final day of the second annual Indianapolis Theatre Fringe Festival – to see the plays they had not yet scratched off their to-do list.

They came hungry, as well, but most of them found few culinary options among the Mass Ave restaurants that have either limited Sunday hours, or no hours at all.

That complaint, however, is one of the few serious blemishes on what is otherwise a stellar IndyFringe report card. As we have previously documented, the 10-day festival ended with plenty of smiles, compliments and even giddiness as record-smashing crowds lined up to see performances by the 36 theatrical troupes or the 12 youth groups.

That is not to say, however, there were no complaints. IndyFringe organizers wisely distributed comment cards for the paying customers – and sweetened the pot by offering free dinners for lucky winners. That carrot pushed the total responses into the thousands.

There was praise aplenty, but we've covered that turf. Here are some of the more representative negatives:

- ❑ Too many shows lasted only 30 minutes or slightly longer.
- ❑ The stage at the Murat Center venue wasn't raised enough to allow people in the back rows to see.
- ❑ The \$10 price per show is too high. Along that vein, several folks suggested some sort of discounted "season ticket."
- ❑ There is a lack of signage along Mass Ave (a condition that will be remedied to some degree this very month, when four pedestal maps are installed on sidewalks along the corridor as part of the Cultural Development Commission's ongoing work).

Some comments fell more into the category of constructive criticism. One visitor recommended sidewalks lined with booths, where visitors could buy custom jewelry, clothing or art.

That thought was echoed as well by Richard Maritzer, a member of the Sound and Fury troupe from Los Angeles. Maritzer suggested a "Fringe Hub," perhaps one street



**BABBLIN'
BROOKS**

*Musings from the editor
about life downtown
(or just about anything else
he wants to write about.)*

By Bill Brooks

blocked off to serve as the center of activity, complete with food booths, crafts, art booths – all of which would serve to attract more potential theater-goers.

He had a second complaint, one not under the control of festival organizers. He said festivals in Winnipeg and Edmonton, Canada, draw much more daily media attention. The festival, he said, should be on television and on the front page of The Indianapolis Star each day of its run.

Leigh Mabry Young, meanwhile, would like IndyFringe to stage only original productions in order to support and encourage theater companies which present original material. That would include her local group, The People's Playhouse.

"I would like to see it where it's not published authors competing against the little guys," she said. That's not what Fringe is."

One of the new elements of this year's IndyFringe – street performers – drew raves along with suggestions: More of them.

Pauline Moffat, the festival's executive director, will most certainly be pondering the myriad of comments and input she was left with when the greasepaint had all been packed.

Not long after the festival's end, she hosted the U.S. Fringe Festival Conference at the Athenaeum, where she was able to network with festival organizers from places as diverse as New York City, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Cincinnati and Orlando.

What she learned is that the Indianapolis event is on the right track.

She learned that, in year three, the festival should consider cutting back somewhat the number of shows while it continues to build an audience. She also learned that the international component is invaluable for audiences as well as for the development of local performers.

She also got strong feedback on FringeNext, which gave talented youth a chance to shine.

"FringeNext is important to the growth of audiences and performing groups," she said. "A dedicated theater at ComedySportz provides a safe youth theater environment – something other festivals do not have."

Moffat also learned, unfortunately, that even fringe festi-

vals with 10 years of track record have difficult times building sponsorships.

But that doesn't keep her from looking ahead with optimism.

Before we begin talking about the third annual IndyFringe, she will be working to build the festival's relationships in its own neighborhood.

"IndyFringe has demonstrated over two festivals that we can pull people Downtown and show them what a fabulous place it is," she said. "It is up to the developers, realtors, merchants, restaurant owners and retail stores to give them a warm welcome and demonstrate it is a fun and safe community."

The Mass Ave Arts & Theater District, she said, has success to build upon.

"Mass Ave and the theaters on Mass Ave do a wonderful job of hosting IndyFringe," Moffat said. "We are very grateful for having such a wonderful cultural district where the theaters, bars and restaurants are all within walking distance. Our audiences love it – and so do our performers."

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