

During the course of Calgary's regular theatre season, the Calgary ACTS Adjudication Team provides local community theatre companies with written feedback on all elements of their productions. For the Calgary Fringe, some of these adjudicators have volunteered to turn their critical eye on this year's crop of shows. Find a regular theatre-goer's opinion on each show, listed alphabetically below, approximately one day after the first showing of that production.

Amateur Night of the Living Dead

So Hitler, Jesus and Christopher Walken walk into a comedy club... The set up is compelling, particularly in the hands (and sick minds) behind last year's hit *Jihad Me At Hello*. The punchline, however, is hit and miss.

Some of the near-misses even manage to be compelling in their own way; part of the fun of the show is watching it – deliberately, in most cases – play off the hilarious awkwardness of failed comedy and failed comedians.

Throughout, *Amateur Night of the Living Dead* plays chicken with the trainwreck of lame standup. Sometimes, the near-miss leaves the audience breathless from their laughter. But a few times, I heard the sickening crunch of jokes (and whole scenes) dying – the audience sure wasn't drowning it out.

However, when this show works, it works magnificently, whether plumbing the depths of a comedy club MC's hatred for hecklers or witnessing the brilliant stylings of the world's only (un)living zombie comedian. These inspired sequences make the more pedestrian material worth sitting through.

The B-List

You can't really be a proper Fringe without a cabaret show (you also need three one-woman shows and an off-the-wall musical, but those are other reviews), and it's worth bonus points if it's a drag queen cabaret show. Well, call us a proper Fringe. The B Girlz take to the stage for a riotous hour of high energy song and dance, well seasoned with smutty jokes, catty zingers and innuendo.

Basing their show on the four classic tentpoles of the cabaret – sex, drugs, celebrity obsession and Canadian immigration law – they rip through seemingly dozens of songs and song parodies covering a wide range of musical styles and eras in a non-stop frenzy of entertainment. Two minutes in, I made the note that this show is exactly what you'd expect, given, say, the publicity photo. Of course there's audience participation. Of course there's jokes in bad taste. Of course they make fun of poor Britney Spears. There's a bit of a plot to the show – centred around their trip to rehab in a bid to become celebrities but also including a wonderful medley of Canadiana from Anne Murray to Avril Lavigne – but it doesn't matter. What matters is that the audience is guaranteed a gloriously over the top good time, from performers who give it their all.

Big Winner

This one was no winner. Reggie and Jackson can't get a break- stuck in Red Deer, working at Walmart, a former beauty queen and her heavy-drinking, heavy-partying roommate can't even win in the Tim Horton's roll up the rim contest.

Both actors were strong and I was impressed by their characterization, but the script fell flat. With too many scene changes and just not enough action, this hour-long performance ran over and didn't keep my attention. A little too sad, but maybe not sad enough, Big Winner just didn't do it for me.

Cam and Legs

'Cam and Legs' is not to be missed. Brian Fidler weaves a whimsical tale of Legs, the headless DJ who yearns to get on the cover of DJ magazine. You soon forget the man manipulating the puppet and get caught up in this yarn about the pursuit of dreams. Remarkably, there are no words in the production but an underlying intertwinement of the story with music. If you go for no other reason, go to see the amazing DJ capabilities and break dancing moves of Leg's as well as his friendship with Cam. Make time to see this intimate production so you can experience the best that Fringe has to offer.

Circumference

This is your typical one-woman show, saved from its own clichés by the genuine and well-rounded performance. There are some zingy one-liners, a supporting cast of oddball characters, and a few touching moments tied together by a self-obsessed retelling of a young woman's struggles with obesity. Highlights include a hellish yet believable junior high gym teacher and a mind-body duality that becomes a full-fledged relationship. The minimal set and a catchy soundtrack stay out of the way of Amy Salloway's high energy, open-hearted performance. Although a bit confusing in its initial wild jumps in time, the play settles nicely by the end and stands up as a well executed, if somewhat formulaic production.

Cry Havoc

If summer movies are mostly thin excuses to see explosions, gunplay and fistfights, I'm surprised it took so long to see a piece of summer theatre where the dialogue is mostly an excuse to string together fist fights. Cry Havoc is just such a beast – a sketch comedy show with a violence injection.

Maybe that should read violence insertion. A few scenes are decently funny sketches that end with mostly adequate violence tacked on arbitrarily – a minute of adequate fighting to... provide the opportunity for a glib one-liner or two? To draw the show out? On the other hand, one or two scenes have excellent fight choreography, but I've played computer games with better dialogue. Only a couple of scenes actually fulfil the show's promise of clever comedy blended with stage fighting; the satisfying opening, and – I'll not reveal the best joke in a show that could use a few more – a sketch where two pop

culture tropes from the 1970s cross paths.

Does Cry Havoc fulfil its promise as summer popcorn theatre? It's no Die Hard – or even Die Hard 4, but it might be a Transporter 2. Sometimes enjoyable – but still forgettable.

Dead Lover's Day

This show takes you on a journey through being together forever and letting go in a musical. Nothing says 'I can't let go' quite like dancing and singing zombie like creatures, each with their own quirks. And the quirks were endearing and well performed. Together, this cast of 8 had the most beautiful harmonies and it was a pleasure to listen to them sing. Full costumes, extreme hair and zombie-ish make up made each character frightening and loveable all at once. The show was well written, well rehearsed and well choreographed. The story took to both sides of the loss of a love relationship. It made you think and was thoroughly entertaining! If you see one show, see this one!

Debbie Does Dallas

Gimme a D, Gimmie an A, Gimmie an L... you get the point. Cheerleaders, librarians, football players and lack of money for a plane ticket, make for a good show. Well, add some singing, dancing, orgies, bananas and candles to make a good porn show. Discovering sex sells, the Cheerleaders rally around making money to send Debbie to Dallas. The show will take you back to high school cliques and stereotypes and first time sexual experiences. There are good characters and even some character growth, no pun intended. The show is partly improved with a new guest artist nightly. I thoroughly enjoyed the show and laughed the entire time. This show is definitely worth going to see, more than once as you never know what will happen next!

Eve: The Musical

When it comes to the Fringe, one can be guaranteed only one thing: a mixed bag. This performance was way over the top. Take an over-sexed Adam and Eve, a particularly uncomfortable simulated oral sex scene, a bunch of cheap magic tricks, a God definitely unlike the one I imagined as a little kid in Sunday school, and some highly questionable musical numbers- and you've summed up the hour long performance of Eve.

This re-imagining of the bible story definitely left me questioning- what exactly was this playwright getting at? I would have liked to have seen a little more explanation at the end, as the conclusion felt quite rushed. Adam and Eve certainly looked like they were trying, and both had strong voices.

Overall, Eve needs more work, and less camp. Make it sizzle, make it sexy, but make it make sense.

Fetish

Fetish is a one-woman show about a young girl who sells her panties on the internet, has an affair with a married man, and was once part of the popular crowd in junior high school. The primary failing of this piece was its inability to tie these three storylines together in any meaningful way. The attempts at metaphor and poetry came across as stilted and unnatural. Moments of humour felt forced and the show was generally lacking energy and movement.

While the performance was fair enough, this is a dramatic piece without enough meat to produce any real sense of drama. There is a competitive market in one-woman shows at the Fringe and Fetish is not likely to be a contender.

Glory Days

What should a one-man play offer? Laughs? Drama? Pathos? Glory Days combines all of these into a powerful 1-2-3 combo. This show tells a story of a championship Canadian boxer, but is really telling the story of his life, his love and his roots. The material is straightforward; it's a sentimental journey down memory lane, with the edges sanded off, and no plot twists except for the most obvious ones. Nevertheless, the compelling solo performance brings all of these together in a thoroughly enjoyable production.

This is also the swan song for Prairie Boy Productions, the 16 year festival circuit veterans. (In fact, their final show is here in Calgary; Saturday Aug. 9 at 5:30). This production deserves a full house.

Jem Rolls: How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Mall

Do not miss this show! A fast-paced, explosive, and unpredictable barrage of words takes the audience on a mind-bending journey from the car-park, through the supermarket, and into a man's self-commentating brain, before finally depositing us in the dreaded unreality of the suburban shopping centre. Jem succeeds in delivering more than just a string of witty one-liners. Each section of this piece escalates and astounds as it reveals new insights into an activity we take so for granted. Like the clever wordsmith that he is, Jem crafts, shapes and builds a story that has the audience hanging on every word.

Les Ms.

There are all sorts of potential pitfalls a show like *Les Ms.* could fall into. Robyn and Liesel sidestep these all neatly to bring us a show that had the audience roaring and breathless in turns. The famous musical *Les Miserables* is presented to us in 60 minutes flat. A whirlwind of energy, this two woman team tears through musical numbers, hysterical plot summations, and more shawls and vests than you can shake a fist at.

Whether you are familiar with the source material or not, you can't help but be drawn into the cleverly crafted world of *Les Ms.* Tight, well-paced, and bursting at the seams with comedy and energy, *Les Ms.* is a must-see of the Fringe!

Mating Rituals of the Urban Cougar

An hour of impressively engaging spoken word poetry, Mating Rituals of the Urban Cougar held my attention. In a bare-bones venue, the performer interacted with the audience and shared with us stories about being a poet, life in Vancouver, the "cougar phenomenon", her own personal dating history, and being a woman. As unpretentious as can be, this was like spending an hour having a conversation at the bar with a fascinating (and attractive!) woman.

Heavy on the feminist side, but without being angry or over-the-top, this was an enjoyable performance. I'm not a fan of spoken-word poetry, but I left feeling empowered, in the least cheesy way possible.

Old Growth

This is a show about a murdered tree – a golden-coloured spruce that grew in the Queen Charlottes and was cut down by a schizophrenic former logger to make a statement against the logging industry. In this show, two performers try to capture the spirit of the dead tree, in a cross between an environmentalist harangue and a mystic ritual, using their flute and bongo skills. I predict a few of you are compelled by this premise – you fortunate, enlightened, probably dreadlocked few will undoubtedly enjoy this show, and can stop reading now.

For the remainder of us, this show comes across a petulant environmental rant that's nothing you haven't heard dozens of times before. It comes across as almost a parody of the granola stereotype, from pseudo-mystical hijackings of Haida legend to self-important rants about... you guessed it, the loathsome SUV. It's every bit as tiresome as that modern jackass in your grade 12 class who thought he was the first one ever to read Adbusters. Breaking news: the world has limited resources!

But enough about content – let's talk form. The show has a lyrical bent to it, veering towards poetic, particularly with the live flute accompaniment. In the earlier moments, when the tone moves away from the strident, it waxes compelling. Too bad this wanes by the end of the show into ever more petulant territory.

Pitch Blond

This dynamic one woman show takes us on an amazing journey of actress Judy Holliday. This brilliant actress keeps you captivated with her amazing voices distinguishing between the dumb blond and the gifted woman. One thing I thought was so great about this show was the recorded voices and parts of shows. You heard from radio shows hosts, the judge in the trial and the academy awards, to name a few. Her interaction with them was amazing! I was wondering what it was like to be art of a communist acting troupe. I would go see her again. The show was well performed and well researched. It made me come home and google search Judy Holliday.

Pizza Girl and the Dark Enigma

This hour-long romantic musical was heavy on the cheese, but lacking substantial toppings. Our charming heroine Melody has not had it easy. Orphaned early and working at the local Pizza Hut, we soon discover that the waitresses are serving up more than sizzling hot slices. With her new friend Smithy, she escapes her going-nowhere life in the big city for a chance at hitting it big, rockstar-style, as Pizza Girl and the Dark Enigma.

Pizza Girl has a great voice, but after an hour, I was really sick of their "hit single".

I know some people like weird things on their pizza, but I'd prefer mine to be a little less corny. Pizza Girl and the Dark Enigma doesn't sizzle, but on the upside, it won't burn the roof of your mouth. This young cast and playwright is having a great time with Pizza Girl, and while it could use some significant work to smooth out some rough spots, Pizza Girl and the Dark Enigma is a nice, light snack. And after all, even when pizza isn't great, it's still pretty good.

The Princess and the Pea Brain

I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want....The Princess and the Pea Brain. This is a fast moving, energetic tale of a Princess who wants to be her own person, a prince who wants to find out who he is and a Queen who wants to rule the world. There are laugh out loud moments/comments that only the adults get, sword fights, a whimsical Weirdo, a love story and audience participation....'Oooooohhhh'....What's not to love? The room was packed so if you want to attend, get your tickets early.

Pussy Sushi

Don't be fooled – Pussy Sushi is not a clown show. It is an over-the-top exercise in playing dumb for comedy's sake, and Bev and Tonka do a solid job of never winking at the audience as they bumble hopelessly along. The show presents series of scenes as the two misfits plan to leave their trailer park world for the big-city glamour of Calgary, but fails to provide sufficient obstacles to really escalate the humour. Tied together by some cute prop gags and a couple well executed video clips, this show feels like it could have been a lot more funny if it had been developed to the point of a second punchline. Trailer-park girls are ignorant and trashy. We get it.

They're Just Not That Into Me

Local girl Allison Lane is becoming a mainstay at the Calgary Fringe. This year's offering sees Lane bemoaning the state of her love life. The 12 steps of dealing with a break-up provide a thin veneer of structure for a show that ultimately feels like listening to one of your kinda funny friends vent for 45 minutes. Most frustrating is how the show simply ends on a "but then I just decided to be happy" note, leaving this reviewer wondering what the point was of the previous 43 minutes.

Ultimately, *They're Just Not That Into Me* comes across as a stilted, faltering stand-up routine. With the plethora of one-woman shows to choose from at the Fringe you can afford to pass this one by.

Use Me: An Undead Musical

When Alastair wakes on a mortuary slab, he is thrust into a new world where death is not necessarily the end and love is little more than a song away. Throw in an ingénue ballerina (also deceased) and a profiteering mortician and you've got a surreal love triangle that should make for a frothy, hilarious good time. Unfortunately, the play ends up taking itself a bit too seriously with long stretches of dialogue encumbering the musical numbers. Brent Podesky steals the show as Laz, the villainous mortician behind Alastair's transformation, with the best dialogue, the best numbers, and a singing voice that leaves his partners behind. Word to the wise: get there early and sit in the front. Several key scenes take place on the floor, and the lack of an elevated stage makes them a challenge to see.

Walter

Thirty minutes of Fringe perfection! Walter is short, snappy, racy and dark- everything a fringe show should be! A traditional-style play, Walter's cast had great chemistry. The pacing was just right and the audience was loving it.

Following the death of her womanizing husband, a grieving widow wants answers. A mortified mortician insists that she keep a sense of decorum. Things get interesting when our mortician proves to be a whole lot more than just a dull funeral home director- and he opens the widow's eyes to a whole lot of possibilities.

Walter was laugh-out-loud funny in places, and featured the best corpse this reviewer has ever seen on stage, period!

Who's Afraid of Tippi Seagram?

Sit back and get ready to laugh until you cry! With a stage presence that is powerful and uncomfortable, Tippi explains why she's at the Fringe. With many political jokes and antidotes, this show crosses many lines, including the one she pretends to draw on stage. Guaranteed to offend some and please others, Tippi's show takes no prisoners. When she's not taking jabs at celebrities, she is picking on random audience members. I laughed so hard at times my eyes were watering! The hour went by far too fast. Tippi captured the audience and definitely owned that stage! This show is a must see, even if it's just to see her newest 'baby'! I want to say this show is retarded, because I am told not to! It is quite brilliant and worth the money!

Wildwood Park

Taking us on a whirlwind of emotion, Wildwood Park takes us to a house with secrets. The two actors in the show are brilliant. Watching them for an hour gave us a chance to see some great characters that have obsessions and flaws that make you want to help them. The script is a horrific story of a house that saw a family murdered and an obsessed real estate agent wanting to sell the house. As there are no set pieces, sometimes it was hard to picture the rooms they were in, but the brilliant acting made you forget that and wonder what happens the next day.

The Wizard of One

This one man show recasts the familiar Wizard of Oz as an old man's struggle to escape the retirement home he has been forced into by his villainous daughter-in-law (who also happens to be the home's head nurse). Although well performed with clear characterizations for each of many roles, this show falls down by following its source material too closely. As a revisiting of Oz it brings no new insights into the source material, while as a means of exploring the challenges of the elderly it comes off as too simplistic. And the tight marriage to the plot of the original ensures that there is little to surprise as the story unfolds. This show will be fun for kids but remains a disappointment for fans of the source material.