

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.

### **Are You Priest Enough?**

Bob Legare's "Are You Priest Enough?" follows the trials and titillations of a young man's course through Catholic seminary as he searches for a direction in his unsettled life. In classic one-man-show style Legare piles on portrayals of grouchy priests, nerdy classmates, a pouty ex-girlfriend, and a haplessly hot nun to support a sweet, if meandering, lead who is not quite sure if he wants to step away from ordinary life. Legare's performance isn't always crisp enough to keep the supporting cast straight, but a couple of surprisingly charming musical numbers perk up a show that seems as uncertain about its direction as its naïve but heartfelt protagonist.

### **Boobs: A Tale of Two Titties**

I like big boobs and I cannot lie... and if you do too, than this Fringe Show is for you! This cheesy, politically incorrect, sketch comedy piece is easy to laugh at, but it still manages to share some of life's more sedate beauty with the audience. With tits, cocks and a catchy musical number (which is still playing in my head), this light-hearted show has something for everyone. Not all of the sketches are stellar, but with audience participation and a front row splatter zone, the low moments are easily overlooked. And if you can spare the ten bucks, buy a t-shirt; the proceeds go to save something we all love: boobs.

### **Chemo Burlesque**

On one hand, this is the story of one woman's struggle with breast cancer. The script itself can be predictable at times, albeit with the occasional unexpected flight of fancy. It's very well done, with a strong virtually solo performance by Christina Parker. The real highlight of this production, however, is in the innovative staging. A live soundtrack by a solo upright bass provides a pulse, while a burlesque element is woven throughout the proceedings. Initially, this seems like little more than a stage hand in fishnets, but as the play develops, it becomes a devastating counterpoint.

### **The Cockwhisperer: A Love Story**

One of the true delights of last year's Fringe, Collette Kendall is back, but this time without her alter ego, Tippi Seagram. Instead, she brings us this much more personal and autobiographical show. The monologue primarily traces her relationships with three important cocks (and to some degree, the men attached to them). The show begins as a hilarious look at sex, especially as seen through innocent eyes – you'll never look at chewing gum the same way again. However, the material veers into more poignant territory mid-show and can't quite regain momentum afterward.

### **Confessions of a Baby Boomer Bombshell**

Zandra Bell writes, directs and stars in a piece that resembles stand-up comedy more than theatre. For 60 reasonably sharp minutes, this 'guru of middle aged angst' has the primarily 45+ crowd in stitches. Laughing themselves silly, murmurs of 'it's so true' ripple through the crowd. For this particular 30-something the litany of stale jokes (think airline food, the movie Alive, botox, how difficult it is for women to pee outside, and the clincher: how young people wear their pants too low!!) wasn't quite enough to sell me on Zandra Bell, even with her polished delivery. Though, bless her heart, she did manage a Blackberry joke by the end so there may be hope for this baby boomer after all.

### **Cross Purposes**

Limiting itself to just three genres, Cross Purposes is a comedic murder mystery musical. Featuring some great musical performances despite the obvious limitations of its venue, Cross Purposes is sometimes ridiculous and frequently laugh out loud funny. The only failing of this charming little show may be that it doesn't go quite big enough. It may be hard to imagine, but this campy production would have benefited from kicking it up a few notches. But in the end, Cross Purposes delivers for exactly what it is: pure, silly fun.

### **Crystal Ball**

Crystal Ball by Gas and Light Productions treads the familiar Fringe ground of a show about putting on a show. As the newcomer debates the merits of the community theatre lifestyle he must also navigate the web of relationships and face down the company's resident "ghost". Lisa Schutt stands out as a young actress deeply committed to finding the backstory and motivation for her upcoming portrayal of the non-speaking maid in the company's next show. But the overall feeling is of an idea stretched to fill too much time with "surprises" that have been telecast from the start of the play. Crystal Ball's humour leans pretty heavily on the clichés of the typical community production which makes it kind of ironic when the show itself succumbs to the same faults.

### **Drunken Fu@ker**

In Drunken Fu@ker, Sean Bowie leads the audience on a haunting and profound journey into the destructive depths of alcoholism. Told in a series of crystal sharp vignettes, Bowie takes us from drive-in romances and youthful excess through unfettered lust into a world of thoughtless violence and willful self-destruction. Accompanied live and with a single stool for a set, this show makes maximum use of the Fringe aesthetic to deliver a searingly honest performance that strips Bowie bare in every sense of the word. Devastating yet redemptive, Drunken Fu@ker is simply not to be missed.

### **Graceland and Asleep On the Wind**

How well do you know Elvis? When is time to let go of an obsession for something? How do you let go, when what you're really holding onto, is too painful to deal with? A young sister's journey to connect with her brother who died in Vietnam, through his love for Elvis. The connection between two Elvis experts, and the reasons they both go to Graceland, is heartwarming and well acted. The two plays go together, with the second the events that lead her to Graceland. Her brother, her protector. Very moving and well worth seeing at the Fringe.

### **Harper Girl Does Canada**

Harper Girl Does Canada takes us through the highs and lows experienced by the self-appointed president of the Stephen Harper fan club. Miss Ruby Jones delivers an energetic performance in a piece that attempts to blend video clips with live performance, to mixed success. This show is sure to elicit a few laughs with pokes at Mr. Harper's 'lego block hair' and 'robot eyes'. Unfortunately, this Harper Girl relies entirely on irony as comedy and, ultimately, this show is as disappointing as Stephen Harper's recent ideological swings.

### **Heracles: The Mythologically Accurate Adventures**

Scorpio Theatre bring us this witty version of the legend of the figure more commonly known as Hercules that, despite the completely irreverent take on the myths, still maintains a certain fidelity that occasionally veers into nerdy detail. A chaotic, charmingly low-budget production of the sort where toga accessories are the main difference between characters and where a water gun cleans the Augean stables, Heracles speeds through Greek mythology at a blistering pace. Although the second half loses comic steam, the madcap adventures of the first half are still plenty entertaining.

### **HOJA**

This is an interesting element in the Fringe; essentially it's just an acappella concert with a bit of inter-song banter. The singing ability of the three man group is unquestionable, going from silky harmonies to beatboxing from one number to the next. The tight, high-energy choreography feels almost too slick, and the various bits (drag the audience member up, surprise falsetto gag) work as well as I'm sure they have the previous seven hundred shows. The musical selection is designed to appeal to the largest common denominator, with plenty of classics. At one level, there's nothing specific to fault the show, but it just feels too smooth and bland.

### **Jem Rolls**

Jem Rolls: man from another time – a mad prophet poet slinging universal truths from the pulpit of personal reflection. If you caught his show last year, the style will be familiar – Jem rattles and roars as he delivers a series of poems bursting with clever twists, linguistic acrobatics, and crackling insights. This time strung together by a delightfully self-aware commentary on his process and performance, Jem's poems take the audience further and further into the intricacies of his mind. From the hysterical to the outrageous, Jem Rolls leaves us freshly aware of the intense power that only a master of language can successfully wield. And you won't want to miss the shortest horror story ever told.

### **Jenny Wynter's One Night In Labour**

Hidden a decent walk from the main Fringe area at the Loose Moose theatre, One Night in Labour is a comedic and autobiographical look at the nature of becoming a mother that has a few sensational comic gems, including quite possibly the single greatest entrance ever, but also a few bits that fall flat. Using every trick in her considerable arsenal, from improv to puppetry to some hilarious songs, Wynter is charming, but sometimes unfocused, especially in the more narrative sections.

### **Kreskinned**

Kreskinned is the story of a first date gone horribly wrong...or perfectly right. With the power of hypnosis on their sides, this young couple is able to drop the other to sleep at the mere mention of a key word. Awakened by a snap and with a reasonable chunk of time missing, both halves of this couple use this power over each other for good and not so good (think embarrassingly short sexual encounters or smoothing over social faux pas). Hampered by unnecessarily long scene and costume changes, the ultimately failing of Kreskinned is that fate which befalls many Saturday Night Live sketches. A good concept for 30 minutes simply can't stand up for 70 minutes.

### **Lapse**

Walking into the theatre, one sees three statues all draped in white veils. These living statues add an element to the show that is well worth watching. The show recalls a girl's journey home to confront the priest who dealt with her mother and fathers deaths. The priest and the girl each give a strong performance with a tough script. Issues are dealt with that can be very tough. The ending was a bit odd, but overall, you come to an understanding with the priest and let Katherine into your heart.

### **My Autopsy**

Starting as Dracula, master storyteller, Hamish Boyd, takes you on a journey of a mans life and experiences. Hamish plays many characters using different voices, accents and acts. Each one is well-defined and fun to watch. At times it felt like I was watching Calvin (Calvin and Hobbes) as he became each character, the way a child, with a big imagination would. I felt it needed to end sooner, as he went full circle, then continued. Hamish is a pleasure to watch!

### **On Second Thought**

Sibling rivalry. Sexual Identity. Teachers. Students. Friends. Man. Woman. One night stands. Porn. Career choices. Parents. Paul Hutcheson takes you to places you may or may not have been to before. From the moment he starts to the second he leaves the stage, the laughter keeps coming. Sitting in the front row, I have not had that good a laugh in years. Watching someone tell their life sorry through humour, was a great way to spend an hour, even if it was too much information at times! This show is well worth seeing at the 2009 Fringe. On second thought, it is well worth seeing twice!

### **The Power of Ignorance**

Chris Gibbs is one of those natural comedic talents that could leave an audience in stitches just by reading out of a dictionary. In "The Power of Ignorance" Gibbs portrays Vaguen, a self-help guru promoting a new philosophy where the opposite of "no" is "don't know". While the script allows the disturbingly funny backstory of Vaguen's childhood to seep through the cracks of his current lesson on the value of not knowing, it is Gibbs' ability to improvise and interact with the crowd that marks him as a true master of the stage. Every disruption or unexpected answer from the audience just fed into the humour of his act, all without missing a beat or breaking character in the least. And when a performer can make the audience roar by the simple act of picking a bit of lint off the stage, it doesn't really matter how he makes it all work – ignorance is bliss.

### **Some Reckless Abandon**

Desperation can make people do strange things, and for a 19 year old girl desperate to leave her small town, flying to do missionary work in Honduras makes perfect sense; never mind the fact that she's not even religious; it's the only way out. Fringe favourite Cara Yeates ("Bye Bye Bombay") produces a bravura performance bringing the character of Madeline vividly to life, filling her with depth and sympathy and really bringing the audience along on this disorienting trip to a third world country. The clever staging helps Some Reckless Abandon set the standard for what a one woman show can be.

### **Straight From That Side of Town**

Amidst an odd blend of comedy, drama and movement there lays a play about a girl and her relationship with her mother. Moving fluidly from scene to scene, Catharine Montgomery is a child, an out of control waitress, a person mourning the passing of the most important person in her life. Quirky, frothy and funny around the edges, Straight From That Side of Town has a beautifully poignant core and Catherine Montgomery has a beautiful physicality and undeniably brilliant stage presence. If you like a linear and easily understandable plot, this isn't the show for you. But if you're looking to sample something a little different this Fringe, give Straight From That Side of Town a try.

### **Thomas Baxter's ThoughtControl**

The premise sounds a little cheesy, to be sure: Thomas Baxter will control your mind. And it starts like a cross between your Psych 101 professor and the magician your parents once hired for your birthday party. But once he gets on a roll, be prepared to be astounded. Combining some incredibly subtle and perceptive psychology with the amazement of a skilled mentalist and even a touch of sleight of hand, this show is a fascinating and highly enjoyable nook of this year's Fringe lineup. If you're one lucky audience member, you'll even have the chance to win big money. Of course, with Thomas Baxter controlling your thoughts, no chance in hell.

### **TransCanada '69**

About halfway through the show, the skilled solo guitarist Colin Godbout asked the crowd who knew Lenny Breau. If this is you, stop reading now and go to this show. A thin theme of a cross Canada train journey in 1969 holds together this pleasant evening of music, starting at Leonard and rolling west to Joni. The heart of the show is in Godbout's innovative guitar technique, drawing on the folk and jazz traditions in equal measure. The generation gap is in effect here, though; as someone who would be more interested a TransNorthwest '91 show, I found the original compositions more engaging than the covers.

### **The Vagina Monologues**

If my vagina were a flower it would have wilted after about sixty minutes. This mainstream script is undoubtedly powerful, but does not translate well into the Fringe experience. Certain members of the cast possess the insight and honesty that provide audience members with something they can connect to, but by and large the truth and beauty found within The Vagina Monologues becomes lost in the performance's length and poor pacing. But if you are looking to spend a couple of enjoyable hours with

friends, the overall Vagina Monologues experience may be able to facilitate this. The performance venue is quaint and well-equipped with tapas and drink; patrons are encouraged to arrive early and enjoy everything it has to offer.