

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.

America:acirema

As an extremely proud Canadian, I enjoy watching Americans bash their country. It's even better when they try and put down Canada, and it still makes them look even worse! The creators of America:acirema are American and fully aware of what is wrong in their country. The show starts off with a great bit about the gay son and his relationship with the black neighbour. They summed up all the racism and stereotyping using clever plays on words and kept the audience chuckling. However, somewhere in the middle, it became very preachy. War is bad, I get it. I am not sure what I was to do at the end of the show. Not vote for Bush? Move to Canada? I came out a little disappointed and felt like it ended in a lecture and lost all the comedy they had so nicely started with.

Buildings and Bridges

'Buildings and Bridges' is trying really hard to connect. There are two obviously talented performers who have worked through some great material but the show misses the mark. The show is engaging and entertaining but it stops short of providing any insight into the premise which was 'Why do frightening patterns continue to affect women all over our country? When did missing women become normal news?'

There were excellent moments of true life captured through the bar scene and the young couple's relationship but this show never really effectively wove those stories with the sad reality of the woman jumping off the bridge with her young child and the loss to understand the reasons for that or the various other wrongs against women. The sum of this production's parts just did not add up to the whole.

Bye Bye Bombay

Ask anybody who's ever visited India – your first introduction to the place is a riot of colour, noise, movement and confusion. Bye Bye Bombay manages to capture the culture shock about as well as can be managed on a stage. Loosely structured around the story of a backpacker thrust into the Bollywood scene, the one-woman show provides an entertaining peek at the culture and taste of adventure. The performance is skillful and the script clever, with a charming pair of puppets breaking up the main story. The video projection – performer Cara Yeates' partner in many ways – often overwhelms the action on stage; sometimes well (imposing culture shock, or providing an animated comment on the action), and sometimes obliterating the actual performance.

Chainmail Bikini

An entertaining show with strong acting and lots of energy, Chainmail Bikini has several really funny lines and a strong start, but about halfway through, it dissolves into an after school special. Gamers will love the inside references, non-gamers like myself might be confused but will laugh anyway. The cast makes the best of an interesting venue; the large number of entrances and exits with no wing space was a challenge, but they dealt with it well. Peter Boychuck's writing is light and moves at a good pace. This show doesn't tread any new paths, and I wondered if the subject matter and gaming references were maybe a little dated, but overall, a good Fringe choice.

Chance Moments

As I walked into the theatre, I was immediately taken with the bits of props strewn across the stage floor. I love being intrigued before a show even begins! The characters come onstage and pick up all the 'pieces of their lives' and the play begins.

This is a fairly ordinary love story but told in a brilliant manner – it's like the director tore the script into sections and then pieced the action back together at random. We saw their relationship at various periods but not in the chronological order, which made it seem like a puzzle for the audience to keep track of and put together as it went along. Several of the periods were chance moments of them meeting or running into each other after things had elapsed. As these moments occurred, whatever prop they used was left on the floor, which harkened back to the opening. It was like watching a paint-by-number piece fill in – fantastic! The two actors were very good, although there was not quite enough chemistry between them, especially in the moments when their relationship was intense and particularly because those intense moments did not have the natural build-up of a chronological play.

Will seeing this show change your life? No. But it is definitely worth seeing, especially at just under an hour.

Cinderella the Wizard

"I wish I was magic!" were the words my four-year old daughter uttered as the lights came up after Cinderella the Wizard. With everything that makes up a good fairytale and modernized for humour, this piece is an excellent way to expose your young ones to the joys of Fringing. Constructed for a family audience, Cinderella uses an undertone of literacy and ecology to encourage the development of future fringers. Fantastic character work by some of the cast make up for the intermittent pacing difficulties throughout the show. Overall this entire magic-filled piece was enough to make me scour my wizardology books for spells to make my swiffer soar.

The Clown's Macbeth

The Clown's Macbeth joins a long line of plays based on the rehashing, revisiting, and reassembling of Shakespeare's classic works. If you think Shakespeare could use some silly voices, facebook jokes and the odd star wars reference, then The Clown's Macbeth is definitely for you. Although the classic Shakespeare play here serves no deeper purpose than a plot on which to hang a string of prop gags and funny faces, the show

tears along with such relentless and exuberant buffoonery that one cannot help but chuckle along. While a stinging rebuke of stuffy English teachers everywhere, the Clown's Macbeth lacks the punch to undermine the tower on which the original has long been placed.

Deep Fried Curried Perogies

I know from experience that deep-frying perogies can be a messy experience, ultimately ending in a greasy letdown. But Michelle Todd's got more tricks up her sleeve than I do-her one-woman show is a charming story of a truly Canadian childhood. When Michelle learns that she's pregnant, she explores her own richly diverse ethnic background and wonders how her child will cope with four completely different cultural backgrounds. Despite a few slow sections, the tales of her experiences growing up in Edmonton as the child of a Jamaican father and Filipino mother make for an entertaining hour.

Deer on the Highway

In the words of the Cherry Poppin' Daddies, the second piece of *Deer on the Highway* was a "Zoot Suit Riot". If I could have "thrown back a bottle of beer" I might have been slightly more engaged in the first piece. Despite a strong skill level among the cast, it never managed to catch me or hold my interest. For a piece that was intended to be a shocking intimate look into the lives of two couples, I was unengaged and detached during the forty minutes I spent in my seat. But then as I was ready to leave, the set began to change and suddenly I was transported into *The Blue Note Lounge*, a place where I could happily spend my evenings with a Manhattan in one hand and a cigarillo in the other. I longed to be a sultry Jazz singer leaning across the piano, ready to swing and sing as I was swept into a sensational mix of music from the 30's, 40's and 50's. So if you can handle being a deer in the headlights for forty minutes, the saxophonal-stylings of the second act is worth the cost of admission.

Gnomes

This was a good, steady, over-the-top comedy that played it for laughs and silliness, even using a clever device to have audience participation. All three actors were very strong and polished – they'd obviously been performing it for a while. Before the action began, the SM played a tape of a song someone made up about gnomes that was very funny and set the tone for what was to come. The audience really enjoyed this show; lots of laughs through-out and a thunderous applause at the end.

In Tow

Bob Legare's one-man show is a funny if somewhat faltering combination of comedy and drama. Several comedic notes hit their mark but moments of intended poignancy and drama fall flat. Bob did a great job of competing against the set-up of a very challenging fringe venue but ultimately a meandering script with no real feeling of build, climax, or completion is what hampers this production.

Jesus in Montana

Damn, why did no one tell me? Here I was looking for the Savior inside my heart and it turns out he was hanging out in Montana all along. Barry Smith's first performance in Calgary was met by a full house of jovial audience members, eager to hear about the life and times of your average apocalyptic doomsday cult member. The multimedia presentation that accompanies his comedic storytelling is well designed and easy to follow. If there is one show that shouldn't be missed at this year's Fringe, in my opinion this is it.

Jihad Me at Hello

Jihad Me at Hello is a politically incorrect series of sketches and skits that manage to offend everyone equally. No one is left untouched in this production that mocks race, gender, sexual orientation, physically and mentally disabled persons as well as religion. The production is awash with foul language, sacrilegious diatribes and hints of anarchy. It was entertaining, witty and irreverent all at the same. Jihad Me at Hello is laugh out loud funny provided you can get past the feeling that laughing at these jokes is somehow wrong....very wrong. A must see Fringe show!

Lay Down and Love Me Again

As the show ended I referred to my handy Fringe guide. I was so unclear as to the content of this production that I was hoping to find illumination in my guide regarding genre and plot. What was apparently intended as a comedy instead came across as a mish-mash of random verbalizations. The plot description found within was no help either, reinforcing that the show was merely a collection of random scenes I supposed to be related to the life of the narrator. In the final moments of this play, the audience is pelted with cold Kentucky Fried Chicken. Perhaps it was a fitting end to this random and awkward performance and perhaps you can make more sense of it than I.

Late Night Circus Bizarre

An embarrassment to – amongst other things – Calgary's rich tradition of improv, Late Night Circus Bizarre is modeled on a late night talk show with an SCTVesque lovable loser approach. Unfortunately, this show about an awkward, unfunny, failing talk show quickly becomes an awkward, unfunny, failing talk show in its own right. Improv is always hit and miss, and there were a few genuine laughs, but when much of the cast – in particular the host and main character – don't understand even the very foundations of improv ("Yes, And"), the show is guaranteed to fail, in a painful and pathetic display.

The above review was based on the unbelievably dismal first performance of the Circus Bizarre. The show has since been heavily retooled -- both in terms of cast and structure -- and while it is still as much miss as hit and feels a little injokey, the show is taking steps in the right direction, shows promise and can even be called almost watchable.

Lawrence and Holloman

In this darkest of dark comedies, Lawrence, the most positive (and arrogant) man in the world meets both Holloman, his total opposite, and a series of setbacks that would make Job's life seem charmed. The confident, sparkling performances highlight the brilliant

script, which is packed with witty wordplay and philosophy. The sparse staging only serves to highlight the actors, their wonderful timing and sharp dialogue. An outstanding production!

Local Celebrity

The best local talent of the fringe I've seen thus far came in the form of Alice Nelson. Her one-woman show, *Local Celebrity*, starts with an unusual premise; a potential university student is unwilling to rack up thousands of dollars in student loans. After a string of low-paying jobs fail to bring in the money needed for her post-secondary education, she begins the tentative exploration of the world of "high-class" prostitution. Alice gives an energetic and engaging performance as Tina, known as Ginger to her clients. While some of the script might disappoint in its predictability, overall this show is a fast-paced, funny, and sometimes successfully tragic look into the life of a young sex worker.

Miss April Day's School For Burgeoning Young Strippers

Ever wanted to be a stripper? Miss April will teach you all the 'tricks' of the trade! June Morrow takes the audience through her journey as a stripper. With only a chair and a few props, her high-energy show includes the audience and keeps them laughing. Her charm and charisma keep the audience entertained and wondering where her struggle between reality and fantasy will take them next. This show is fun to watch!

Napalm Blonde

Sketch comedy is a roll of the dice. Aside from improv, no other form of theatre has such a hit and miss quality about it. Unfortunately, this young comedy troupe missed far more frequently than they hit. A weak understanding of the basic form of a sketch comedy show coupled with very apparent under rehearsal left us watching an unpolished show with no movement, no build, and not enough humour. While some of the writing showed promise, this troupe needs a lot of work before they make another foray into the fringe environment.

Napoleon's Secret Diary

History is seldom funny. Entertaining? Yes, but seldom funny. Napoleon? Now, he's funny. Napoleon has been the brunt of short man jokes and even defined as a 'complex' for years so it was not unexpected that an evening entitled 'Napoleon's Secret Diary' might be entertaining and somewhat funny.

In NSD, Ryan Gladstone has managed to capture the essence of Napoleon without relying on his stature (Napoleon's, not Ryan's) for all the laughs. NSD is the quintessential one man show. An engaging script, shared asides to the audience (or Diary, in this case), multiple and well-defined characterizations and a snazzy (yet disturbing) dance number wrap this production in a neat little package that I would absolutely recommend to all. I can't wait to see what he might do with Genghis Khan or George Bush next....

neogenesis

An exposition-heavy show set in a bleak near-future that aims for drama, but tends to overshoot into melodrama. The dystopian premise is a little far-fetched, and leads to a lot of expositional dialogue, which slows down the committed performances. It has no problem raising interesting philosophical questions, but ultimately doesn't really confront them in any serious way, bringing in a range of issues from biowarfare to rape. As one character says, "That's enough awkward topics for one day".

The New Art of Poetry Clubbing

There is something to be said about the power of poetry. Brendan McLeod and Barbara Adler begin their set with a poem, explaining why they aren't dating. They should be dating, they are the same height! I understood their situation, and although the audience was small, all could relate to that! Well spoken with a huge amount of energy, they took turns enlightening the audience. Brilliant. Beautiful. Talented. Touching. Funny. Smart. This is a definite must see. With something for everyone, this dynamic duo will take you away to a place of understanding.

Private i

If you like performance art, chances are you will enjoy this one woman show. A quirky character explores her inner emotions through spoken word and dance, underscored by recordings from an excellent Indie rock group. This non-linear piece is not so abstract as to be incomprehensible, and would serve as an excellent introduction to this medium of artistic expression for those interested in leaving the traditional boundaries of theatre. *Private i* is an excellent festival piece and really illustrates the diversity that stage creation can take.

The Circus is Coming to Town

A highly personal, and very informal one-woman show/therapy session about the creator and her dysfunctional family; the Circus of the title. In theory, the Circus metaphor is supposed to hold the show together, but in reality, it mostly bounces from one anecdote to another without any real overall narrative structure. The material is classic "my craazy family" material; some compelling and funny and some not so much, but it is consistently delivered with energy. Ultimately, the show feels sort of like a night spent at the pub with one of your funnier friends.

The Old Age of Horror

The Old Age of Horror would make a fantastic 5 minute sketch, but at 35 minutes, the running gags become tedious. How many times can we refer to a certain page in The Binder before we just don't care anymore? When did throwing mashed potatoes on the floor become funny? How many awkward sexual advances are these old gals going to make? A cutesy plot and great characterization (but with a heavy reliance on a cliché accent and Golden Girls character archetypes) don't save it from feeling three times longer than it needs to be.

Point Break: Sex & Death Valley

In this media assisted one-man show about a wild weekend in the desert, Steven Marrocco delivers a charming performance that is consistently funny, but never quite hilarious. The show is hampered by a few short framing bits set in an office that slowed down, rather than unified, the far more entertaining weekend's tale. While a range of characters inhabit this world, the action is propelled (and stolen) by Matt, an alter ego of Patrick Swayze – if he was slightly more macho. An entertaining, if ultimately anticlimactic journey.

Sacrilicious!

Somewhere between a sketch show and a play, the trinity of short plays that make up *Sacrilicious!* deliver funny premises and plenty of witty quips, if not a lot of narrative. The performances are functional and the cast's comic timing is strong, although the characters tend to come off on the flat side; the production is simple – yet somehow has some lengthy scene changes slowing down the first play. Despite the flaws, *Sacrilicious!* ultimately succeeds as a piece of light entertainment rather than deep philosophy or great drama.

Sex Over 40 and other Amazing Stories

Sex over 40 and other Amazing Stories is performing a block from the main Fringe venues at the Beat Niq Café and a more perfect venue for this jazz review meets one-woman show could not be found. Backed by a solid trio of local jazz musicians, Sharon Richardson blends original songs with short sketches and monologues to riff on the end of a marriage and the search for a new happily ever after. This show is playful and free-wheeling without ever losing the beat, and pushes risqué right into naughty without betraying its touchingly honest core. *Sex over 40...* heads up to Edmonton after Wednesday, so swing on over to the Beat Niq before you miss one of the coolest shows to hit this year's Calgary Fringe.

64 And No More Lies

Though I'm a full 40 years younger than the character in this piece, I loved it. This one woman show is full of laughs and definite truths. Touching without being sappy, this is a must-see for anyone who is a mother, has a mother, or knows a mother- especially one over fifty. A few noticeable technical glitches and some problems with line delivery stopped it from being a perfect performance, but the performance felt genuine and the audience was charmed.

Stand up, Monkey Poet!

Stand up, Calgary, and put your hands together for the only homo erectus from across the transatlantic gap to set foot in our fine Rocky Mountains during this year's Fringe! The lyrical speak of this guttural storyteller may not be for the weak of heart, but if you can stomach a good *uck and find the humour found at the bottom of a Corona, you are in for a treat. Matt Panesh's intelligent comedic styling leaves the audience members laughing out loud while examining the societal systems and struggles of the populous politicians and the low-brow single white male in the most politically incorrect of ways.

A Twist of Murder

This show is listed as a dark comedy, but the effort by the playwright and actors amounted to not much more than a pale comedy, if that. The acting and writing were very uneven; lots of lines were flubbed and some were so unbelievable they made me want to laugh at how corny they were. Maybe that was the writer's point but if so, the delivery didn't support that. Alynn Trottier, as the wife, at least brought some fire and gusto to the stage. The director missed lots of comedic moments, letting the actors throw away lines which should have been punched through the roof for great laughs. This could have been a very effective black comedy but not well enough written or performed.

Urban Reality

Ground Zero's *Urban Reality* is more of a long scene than a short play, but it hits a lot of the GZT trademarks – sex, violence, drugs, swearing – in its portrayal of an encounter between a drug dealer (David Trimble) and a potential new client (Leda Davies). After celebrated turns in last season's *Trainspotting* (Sage Theatre) and *The Pillowman* (GZT), Trimble is practically typecast as the mean-sonofabitch-that-might-lash-out-at-any-moment. Though well acted, and excellently paced, *Urban Reality*'s shocking revelations are the standard clichés of the genre and the show ends up feeling more gratuitous than exploratory.

Wobbling Madonna

Wobbling Madonna is a one woman show featuring Diana-Marie Stolz (Rosebud, Alberta) as a prim and opinionated mother who has come to her daughter's apartment to pick up the pieces when the daughter breaks down over Christmas. As she cleans the apartment's physical mess, Stolz's character revisits her own troubled past and her relationship with her absent daughter. This heavy-handed production suffers from a meandering and unmotivated script that stretches the credibility of a woman talking to herself well beyond believability. Stolz brings moments of charm to a show that is pleasingly grounded in its historical details, but overall the production fails to find the arc and resolution it seeks.