

THEATER + MUSIC**FRINGE FEST AUDIENCE GROWS**

This year's offerings of offbeat theater, music and dance pull in more attendees and revenue.

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Last week an exhausted Cheryl Kimmi was tallying box-office receipts after 10 days of running non-stop from the moment she woke to the second she crashed at night.

"This morning I said, 'I feel like I've been run over by a Mack truck,' and one of my colleagues said, 'No, you've been run over by the Fringe Festival,'" Kimmi said.

But Kimmi was reeling from a good kind of exhaustion. The director of the KC Fringe Festival — an annual explosion of visual and performing arts that wrapped up July 31 — was able to report significant growth in attendance and revenue.

The festival offered 10 days of dance, music, theater, comedy and drama — and inventive combinations of all of the above — in theater spaces and galleries across midtown and the Crossroads Art District.

Citing preliminary figures, Kimmi said total attendance came to about 14,650, compared to almost 12,500 last year. Revenue this year was estimated at \$121,350, compared to \$102,267 in 2010.

Each year money from ticket sales to individual events is divided between the artists and the venues, while the festival keeps income from the sale of festival buttons and merchandise.

Early last week, the total revenue had not yet been broken down among the festival, artists and venues.

This year the festival, as usual, demonstrated that sex sells. The show with the best attendance was "Rumble in the City," a boy-girl "burlesque battle" created by Marisa MacKay at the Off Center Theatre in Crown Center. The show was seen by 801 theatergoers.

The other top 10 shows broke down this way:

■ "The Rocky & Bullwinkle Horror Picture Show," a crazed musical extravaganza written and directed by Steven Eubank, 766.

■ "Super Spectacular! To Opera With Love," created and performed by the Donovan Ensemble of New Jersey, 507.



Nicole Raab and Stephen Plante were in unison during the Fringe Festival performance of "Tordu Vol: A Twisted Tale of Flight," presented by Voler at Fringe Central.

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Cheryl Weaver embraced Scott Cordes in "Caldwell's Bomb" at the Unicorn Theatre.

■ "Grimm and Bare It," a combined effort of Bee's Knees Burlesque and the Kansas City Society of Burlesque, 482.

■ "Tordu Vol: A Twisted Tale of Flight," by the aerial performance ensemble Voler — Thieves of Flight, 480.

■ "Hexing Hitler," an original play by Tara Varney and Bryan Colley, 413.

■ "Film Classics Presents: Heaven So Far," a satirical theater piece by Kevin King, 368.

■ "How the West Was Warped," comedy sketches and song parodies by Crosscurrents, 364.



Rachel Pallente dragged Doogin Brown across stage during "The Rocky & Bullwinkle Horror Picture Show," a musical parody at the Off Center Theatre in Crown Center.

■ "Caldwell's Bomb," a dark comedy by Bill Rogers, 339.

■ "Rhythm and Boobs: Burlesque on the Bayou," a revue from Gaffe Tape and Glitter, 304.

The latter show edged out Forrest Attaway's provocative drama "Worth," which attracted 302 theatergoers.

Generally, festival offerings each year are inclusive, raucous, artistic, profane, poetic, silly, serious and small-d democratic. This year was no exception. Since its founding in 2006, the event has become a platform for local and out-of-town artists to try out new work, demonstrate their versatility and take creative risks that might not be possible in the world of professional performance beyond the festival.

Your humble theater critic, who saw performances almost every night, noticed something new this year: Virtually every show was well-attended. That suggested a break from the past, when it wasn't unusual to see performances with audiences of fewer than 10.

"In previous years, we had a number of shows that were very poorly attended, and we didn't have that this year," Kimmi said.

One explanation for that, Kimmi suggested, is that people are figuring out how the festival works. In the early years, festivalgoers tended to take in events almost randomly, drifting from one performance to another among venues in close proximity. This year Kimmi saw more people

who had evidently studied the schedule closely and made specific choices.

On the last night of the festival, Kimmi collected some surprising numbers from attendees.

"One gal told us she had seen 28 shows, and at the closing party I did an informal survey, and three people said they saw 32 different shows," she said. "They filled up every possible slot they could. I said we need to name this, and somebody in the audience said, 'They're Fringe-a-holics!'"

For the artists, the festival is a chance to reach a wider audience and to take original work from the lab to the real world.

Attaway, the actor/playwright whose "Worth" attracted healthy audiences at Union Station, said Fringe was a good option for writers.

"It works out better than playwrighting conferences in some cases, because you get feedback from other artists instead of a bunch of eggheads," Attaway said. "It's one of those awesome steps you can take as a writer. It's a little scary. You get it out there, people see it, and the next step is to get another production."

Arika Larson, whose dark comedy "White Sangria" became the best-attended show at Vulcan's Forge, a venue off 39th Street, said the festival offers a writer a chance to see how a script works in front of an audience. And sometimes

the audience can give a playwright vital information.

"There were parts of my show that people consistently laughed at that I never meant to be funny," she said. "When you write a play, it's like a first draft and then it evolves, and it's helpful to have actors working on it."

The Coterie Theatre, the young-audiences company at Crown Center, participated in the festival in its first year. Then the theater sat out the Fringe until this year. It came roaring back with "All of Us," a PG-rated experimental play by Laurie Brooks that took an unblinking look at the pressures of being gay in high school. "All of Us" became the best-attended show at the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre.

"What's in it for the artist in the Fringe Festival is to be in the conversation," said Jeff Church, the Coterie's artistic director. He co-directed "All of Us" with Meghann Henry, the theater's education director. "There's something really fun about having put something up, especially if it's something that's a little bit experimental or left of center. The Fringe pays a lot of dividends."

In the case of the Coterie, some Fringe patrons may have discovered just how high the Coterie's standards are. The company has never contented itself with simply doing kiddie plays and often produces material with strong social messages.

"We're not going to do 'All of Us' on our main stage because it's a Fringe play for a reason," Church said. "That's why we put it there."

Because "All of Us" attracted bigger audiences than any other show at its venue, it earned a final performance on the last day of the festival — part of the "Fringe Hangover" that recognized the most popular shows. Another was Rebecca Kling's "No Gender Left Behind," an autobiographical piece about Kling's experience after getting fired as a teacher for being a transgender woman. Kling, a Chicago-based performer, tirelessly promoted her show by handing out fliers at other venues.

"What I was pleased with was how many of the top Hangover shows were LGBT shows," Kimmi said. "That shows me that Kansas City is becoming a more open and progressive community. I find it very encouraging that these messages are being embraced, and that excites me."

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