

## Rochester Fringe Festival sees quiet start



**Jeff Spevak, Staff writer** 10:31 a.m. EDT September 19, 2014

*(Photo: Jamie Germano/staff file photo)*

It is the purposeful soft opening of a city and a festival that are still feeling each other out. That was Thursday's Day One of the First Niagara Rochester Fringe Festival. Just a handful of events and only half of the venues up and running, if you count the art galleries.

Downtown isn't jumping yet. When the two guys from 20 Penny Opera strolled down the sidewalk, without their ghastly clown makeup, they looked like any of the spikey-haired guys you'd see any late afternoon on Gibbs Street.

But out of this slightly damp-feeling opening evening will spring a full festival, glowing and waning over its 10 days and 25 official venues. A fringe festival, the confluence of music, dance, theater, comedy, children's entertainment, spoken word, visual arts and the 20 Penny Guys pulling nails out of their noses during their cringeworthy shows at the marvelously Victorian Spiegeltent at Gibbs and East Main Street. Good plays, bad plays, funny jokes, groaners. As the philosophers say, how can you understand what's good about the world if you can't contrast it with evil?

### **Leaping into the Fringe**

Perhaps Garth Fagan's concept of modern ballet is defined in the evening's opening piece in his third-floor studio in the Rochester Athletic Club building: "Discipline is Freedom," a tight, full-company sampler that was a fusion of Tai-chi moves and ballet grace evolving into gazelle-like leaps. Propelled by the rhythms of jazz players such as Abdullah Ibrahim and Max Roach, Fagan unleashes the joy of his dancers' movement.

Celebratory, yet with a sense of purpose, the dances were old and new. The show-closing "Polk Street Carnival," a whirling ensemble of four couples — "a fun, frivolous dance," Fagan said — goes back to 1973. "Back when we didn't have any money," he added, noting he had to design the Caribbean-inspired costumes himself. Times are tight again for the arts, but Fagan is an optimistic man. "This too will pass. We have better days ahead."

The eye candy of the large-company pieces bookending the evening contrasted with three stripped-down dances that told concise stories. The best story — in fact, the show-stealer of the night — was Fagan's 2013 duet *No Evidence of Failure*. Opening with Natalie Rogers posing and holding her moves like a compass, she was soon joined by Vitolio Jeune, as the music by Jamaican-Brooklyn pianist Monty Alexander turned to Bob Marley's "No Women, No Love." The modern-dance air of Rogers and Jeune included a kiss and caress, the two smiling hugely: "You can be independent and self-assured and still find a wonderful relationship," Fagan told the audience afterward, almost unnecessarily; Rogers and Jeune told the story well, there was no evidence of failure in this relationship.

Independence is a common theme. A short excerpt from *Lighthouse/Lightning Rod*, with music by Wynton Marsalis, Fagan explained, was about "three people who are so independent they really can't get together for any length of time."

The sweat was flying from Jeune's head as he whirled through *After Hours*, a work in progress by Norwood Pennewell. The hard-working dancer, who appeared in all five pieces, will have to rest up for more Garth Fagan shows: 9 p.m. Friday, 7 p.m. Saturday, 7 p.m. Thursday, 7 p.m. Sept. 26, and 7 p.m. Sept. 27.

### **Auto-matic theater**

The stages are set for Dashboard Dramas: A 2006 Nissan Sentra, a 2014 Dodge Avenger, a 2010 Chrysler Sebring with fast-food wrappers on the floors and a Hyundai Sonata of unidentifiable vintage, all parked in the Spiegeltent lot. Two audience members per car, switching cars after each 10-minute play. One play, *Mental Matrimony*, is written by Rochester's Abby DeVuyst; *Supply and Demand*, *Backstreet Blues* and *Lion Love* are by Kerry Young of Ontario, Wayne County. The plays — "snippets of people's lives," says Young — share first and last lines, but that's about it. "It's like when you're at a stop light and

you see the people in the car next to you," she says. "You wonder, Where are they going? What are they thinking? There's a story there."

The story in car No. 3, *Mental Matrimony*, is a newlywed couple that is not starting out on the same page. Played by Dan Hart and Lainey Catalino, it's funny yet uncomfortable; the audience of two is sitting in the back seat eavesdropping on their argument, as the car's stereo system delivers inner dialogue and a soundtrack appropriate to the moment, such as AC/DC's "Highway to Hell" as the newlywed tension escalates.

Dashboard Dramas resumes at 1:30, 3 and 4 p.m. Saturday, 4:30, 5:30 and 6:30 p.m. Sunday; and 1:30, 3 and 4 p.m. Sept. 27 in the Spiegelgarden.

## **Day Two**

Friday's Day Two is the first full schedule of activities at the Fringe Fest, with the marquee event the free Circus Orange in Martin Luther King Jr. Park at Manhattan Square Park. It starts at 5 p.m. with buskers and a local lineup in the Manhattan Square Bowl: The outlaw alt-country of The Younger Gang, the dance of Geneseo Bhangra and Merged II, Feadan Or Pipe Band and the Celtic rock of Sisters of Murphy. Circus Orange begins at 7:30 p.m., a pyrotechnics parade highlighted by an 18-foot tall steampunk tricycle, with the whole shebang winding up on a stage at Court Street.

Other highlights are focused on the Gibbs Street and East Main Street area, and the Spiegeltent and Spiegelgarden. Returning from its sold-out run last year, the Spiegeltent's offering at 9 p.m. Friday is Mardi Gras by *Cirque du Fringe*, lots of sideshow-style entertainment featuring the Kenya Safari Acrobats and hosted by the nasty clown duo of 20 Penny Circus. Outside its doors, Spiegelgarden's headlining outdoor offering Friday is Rochester's FuturPoint dance troupe collaborating with photographer Carrie Mateosan. That starts at 8:45 p.m. and runs, with some breaks in the dancing, until 10:30 p.m.

For the complete schedule, check [rochesterfringe.com](http://rochesterfringe.com).

[JSPEVAK@DemocratandChronicle.com](mailto:JSPEVAK@DemocratandChronicle.com)

[Twitter.com/JeffSpevak1](https://twitter.com/JeffSpevak1)