

*On the fringe of the Fringe Festival*

# On the fringe of the Fringe: More adventure than I bargained for

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***Kennedy: World-famous, but hidden in Germantown.***

It started in 1997 as the Fringe Festival, welcoming any and all performing artists to Philadelphia. But along the way its organizers created Live Arts, a curated portion of the Fringe where more established innovators could be seen on main stages across the city.

This actually is a good idea, because that way the Fringe Festival doesn't secure a big name European, or American, experimenter for the festival without having a major stage on which to show off the talent. But it also means that many worthwhile, lesser-known performers are often consigned to very unlikely stages. In North, West and South Philly, eager performers hope that adventurous Fringe-goers will find their way to the odd and intriguing venues where spunky local innovators hope simply to fill up

25 seats and get their work performed.

This, folks, is the Fringe— although it is usually found at the fringe of the Fringe, since the big and very worthy names of Live Arts draw most of the dual festival's attention.

## **A theater built in 1819**

I'm a big fan of the fringe of the Fringe, seeking out offbeat performances in neighborhoods I'd never visit otherwise. In Fringes past I've watched Brazilian dance-martial art form Capoeira performers throw themselves head first onto city sidewalks, and followed dancers slowly moving down streets touching sides of buildings or sculpture, giving a new tactile sense of our everyday environment. I discovered one of the city's oldest theaters, the Old Academy Playhouse (built in 1819) still open and functioning in East Falls.

Best of all, last year I discovered the School of Circus Arts on Greene Street in Germantown, where I saw one of the most magical Fringe performances I'd ever seen. Two aerialists swept across the ceiling, hanging by one foot, or they disappeared inside an empty trunk only to reappear with a huge bouquet of flowers. It was a microscopic trip to the circus as designed by Lewis Carroll.

This year I dramatically discovered both the upside and downside of this methodology. I came face-to-face with the risk factor in uncertain neighborhoods— specifically, my car was stolen.

## **The audience walked home**

With this year's Fringe I looked forward to seeing more from the circus people, more at Old Academy. Moving the event ever deeper into the city's fringes struck me as a good idea. At Old Academy Playhouse, two mimes (Andy Petit and Max Petit), performing as **Pumpernickel and Marmalade**, put on a charming old-fashioned mime show, accompanied by an excellent vaudeville style pianist. Every seat was filled. Around me, people talked community affairs and read the East Falls newspaper, *The Fallster*. When I drove away afterward, the rest of the audience walked home, which seemed appropriate.

The highlight of my Fringe venturing this year was **Spherus**, with the internationally famous "innovative" juggler Greg Kennedy at Greene Street Studio in Germantown, where he teaches juggling. Radiating stage presence and charm, Kennedy introduced himself as a college graduate with an engineering degree who fell in love with juggling and ultimately found himself a professional entertainer.

## **This man juggles architecture**

Kennedy and his two pretty and talented lady assistants juggled multi-colored lights that looked psychedelic in the dark. With the lights on, Kennedy juggled a big, open-sided wooden contraption that looked something like a geometry problem. If one side collapsed, then he raised another up— he was juggling architecture.

Long, plant-like stems in a container floated through the air as Kennedy caught them, moved them through space and then tossed them to the ground. The threesome sat on the ground and banged plastic tubes, in effect making a melody out of an odd form of juggling. Kennedy took what looked like a set of mixing bowls, each fitting inside the other, and whipped them all around the air and somehow got them all back in the right order. He balanced a variety of boxes, all different sizes, to create what looked like modern sculpture and then— presto!— it was gone.

It was a beautifully paced and enthralling show. I could easily understand why Kennedy performs all over the world. But why never on a Philadelphia mainstage?

### **Ringers in the audience**

I returned to the Greene Street Studio for *Cirque-ular*, with Dave One Man Sideshow Smith, a Fringe familiar, staging a story about a young juggler who seeks to join a circus. The Ringmaster discourages this would-be circus performer, pointing out the hardships facing his clown, tight-wire walker, aerialist and magician. The Ringmaster also demonstrates that he's a better juggler than the applicant.

Audience members were pulled into the show, but I'm pretty sure these were ringers— I doubt the small gray-haired woman in pedal pushers really could have hung by one foot from the swinging trapeze unless she'd taken lessons. It was good enough, but lacked the imagination and pace of Greg Kennedy's *Spherus*.

### **"Stuff like that happens"**

Then I stepped out of the studio into a cold, dark, rainy night and found that my car had been stolen. When I went back inside the studio where the cast was holding a post-performance party and explained what had happened, I was told: "Yeah, stuff like that happens around here all the time. It's a bad neighborhood."

I was relatively lucky. I managed to get home, soaking wet, after two hours waiting on the sidewalk for the police. Thanks to someone living in that neighborhood, my car was subsequently returned. The \$600 repair bill could have been a lot worse. But needless to add, the car theft overshadowed all my other stimulating experiences at this year's fringe of the Fringe. I don't intend to avoid the artists at the edge in the future. But I'm going to be a lot more careful.

By all means, keep moving the Fringe into new corners of the city. But how about a simple warning to use special caution in some neighborhoods? Don't scare people away, but be honest about parking and subway connections. Like a drop of ink in an otherwise pure glass of water, one horrific crime at an isolated Fringe event could destroy the festival. Keep it sassy, but keep it safe too.♦

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