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PortFringe reaches center stage: Festival expands chances for artists to challenge themselves

PORTFRINGE REACHES CENTER STAGE: FESTIVAL EXPANDS CHANCES FOR ARTISTS TO CHALLENGE THEMSELVES

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With an ethos as fresh and spunky as it is, it's a little incredible that this June, PortFringe – Portland's outrageously successful fringe theater festival – is turning 5. A

throng of thespians, writers, singers, aerialists and a very special quest gathered at Geno's this Saturday for the PortFringe party known as the Katzenjammer, to start revving everybody up for the June week of edgy, unjuried performances – June 18-26 – that will be PF-16.

The PortFringe team defines "katzenjammer" as "confusion; uproar, a hangover....basically it's an after-all-the-parties party." But everyone seemed solidly pre-hangover at Geno's, which was gussied up with tables of Wheat Thins and Kraft Easy Cheese, plus PortFringe's signature Bad Art Auction (curated by **Mariah Bergeron**). The evening's fur-clad emcees, Marie Stewart Harmon and James Patefield, drew our attention to a prominent red band strung across the edge of the stage. "It's not a red tape," Harmon assured us. "It's

 [AFTER-ALL-THE-PARITIES PARTY Mariah Bergeron partakes in the Katzenjammer party for PortFringe.](#)

AFTER-ALL-THE-PARITIES PARTY Mariah Bergeron partakes in the Katzenjammer party for PortFringe.

a really exciting ribbon that someone's going to swear in just a little later."

In the meantime, Janette Hough-Fertig, director of Apparatus Dance Theater, slowly and deliberately licked one hand and then the other, gripped the long white silks suspended from the ceiling, entwined herself, and rose; she was soon joined by fellow aerial artist Ellie MacAnuff wrapping and hanging in the air.

Then it was ribbon-cutting time. And who better to cut a ribbon than Mayor Ethan Stirling? He even has theater creds, said PortFringe committee member Carmen-maria Mandley, who invited him to perform when she learned that he'd "played a legendary Romeo back in the day." Onstage, the Mayor shared some history: his father had acted Off-Off Broadway, and young Stirling himself attended New York's High School of the Performing Arts (of Fame fame) and Julliard, before coming to UMO, where he performed in West Wide Story and, yes, Romeo and Juliet. Mayor Stirling announced that he would read Romeo's most famous soliloquy "as the poetry it is." "That's very Fringe," said emcee Harmon. The crowd cheered. The Mayor read a tender Romeo, then cut the red ribbon.

In the afterglow, performers milled, mingled and sang PortFringe's praises. Harlan Baker said he'd already submitted two short plays about the Spanish Civil War.

Lisa Boucher Hartman, actress and PortFringe committee member, opined that the festival is so vital because "it gives artists the opportunity to fail – and to fail again." Actress Jackie Oliveri agreed. "It gives us the opportunity to test our mettle in any number of ways, and to come together to support each other no matter what."

Now Word Portland, the monthly reading series that brings writers of all genres to LFK, took the stage. Co-founder Dani LeBlanc introduced former Portland Poet Laureate Martin Steingesser, who informed us that "The Algonquin have no word for time." Singer and memoirist Colleen Clark expressed how lucky she felt "to live in a place where a jazz singer can come up at a theater event and speak after the Poet Laureate and the Mayor of Portland."

What's new in PortFringe? According to PortFringe committee member Deirdre Fulton McDonough, 2016 introduces a guaranteed three performances for every act chosen through the lottery. She explained, "This will enable artists to drum up excitement about their show – and potentially make more money! – while giving audiences more chances to attend the PF shows on their 'must-see' lists." Also new is a Teen Apprentices team, which will stage an "Evening Cabaret" and create vibrant hubbub at the PortFringe "hub," and "cross-promotional" events at venues across the Arts District ("PortFringe Pub Crawl, anyone?").

"Since year one, we've always said – about some of our more outlandish ideas – 'five-year plan!'" said McDonough. "Now we're at that point, and our continued growth and success makes some of those crazier ideas not so crazy anymore. Having Mayor Ethan Stirling at the kick-off event, for instance, was perfect because it symbolized how PortFringe has really woven itself into the Portland community."

PortFringe has been successful not just in its adventurous performances, but in its financial model, which

last year funneled over \$27,000 in ticket sales directly to artists, and its economic impact, which an Americans for the Arts Economic Impact calculation estimated to have generated \$150,000 of revenue for local business in 2013.

The festival is also increasingly connected with national and international cohorts; McDonough noted PortFringe's membership in both the United States Association of Fringe Festivals and the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals. "All of this shows how our scrappy little festival has become part of a (inter)national fringe circuit," said McDonough, "which in turn suggests that our contribution to Portland's creative economy only stands to grow."

As did the Katzenjammer's spirits, as the Starcrossed Losers trio played into the night and a bar full of artists dreamed of stirring up innovative commotion come June. If you, too, find yourself dreaming: the PortFringe Lottery is open until January 31. Visit www.portfringe.com.



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