

# POOKAMHURA - Brian Morton & Chris Cracknell PRESS CLIPPINGS

FRINGE FESTIVAL



RAYMOND BEAUCHEMIN

Lisa Randall and Brian Morton. This is Randall's seventh Fringe production, including Toronto and Vancouver. Morton's play is based on a 12-episode YouTube series created about the gaming world.

## Behind the Fringe curtain: Get creative, or die trying

RAYMOND BEAUCHEMIN

When it comes to writing, there are only three rules: write, write, write.

When it comes to writing a play for the Fringe Festival, the rules change exponentially: Write, direct, stage manage, produce, and do the tech if you're not actually on stage performing.

Oh, and sell the hell out of your play.

Hamilton's Brian Morton knows this. He's been doing it almost since the festival started in Hamilton 20-plus years ago.

The first Hamilton Fringe play he ever did was a one-person show in 2006. At the time, Morton was a venue tech, but the Fringe organizers had no budget to pay crew, "so they gave me a slot and I performed 'Krapp's Last Tape,'" a one-act, single-hander that Samuel Beckett wrote in 1957.

Such one-person shows, Morton said, are the bread-and-butter of Fringe because they're easy to produce, "but they're hard to market. It's so hard to distinguish yourself."

They're the bread-and-butter be-

cause a playwright/director/producer/publicist doesn't have to hire a crew to help. That helps moneywise since 100 per cent of the base ticket price of every show goes to the artists. It also means one person has to carry the load.

Lisa Randall, of Toronto, figures she's up to the task.

Randall comes to the Fringe this year in an almost roundabout way. She and a collaborator won a spot through the Fringe lottery — which plays get to be staged are selected by a Bingo ball machine.

Later, her partner got a spot in the Toronto Fringe and Randall found herself with a Fringe spot and having to go solo. But not to worry: This is her seventh Fringe production, including Toronto and Vancouver.

"It was a good nudge," Randall said, or a good kick in the pants to finally write "Sister Sophia Kicks the Habit."

Randall had two aunts who were nuns. The surviving one is 98 and lives in the Mother House in a small Ontario city.

"I stopped practising Catholicism after my parents divorced, the way many people do. At the



time of the divorce one of my mother's sisters told her she was going to go to hell."

That was more than enough for Randall to disengage from them and the church. But then she "started to learn things about their lives — and they became so important to me, not as Catholics but as family members. I gained a deep compassion for them. The play is like a tribute."

Two other solo woman shows are in the works for this year's edition of the Fringe: "Horseface," featuring U.K.-born, Toronto-based artist Alex Dallas and directed by Clare Barry, herself a veteran of the Canadian Fringe tour; and SEE FRINGE, G2

"Horseface" features U.K.-born, Toronto-based artist Alex Dallas.

ALEX DALLAS

## Fringe

CONTINUED FROM G1

"Catching a Cheese Pervert," co-written by Kayla Kurin and Krista Rowe (also the director) and starring Megan Phillips.

For Dallas, it seems a lot of the hard work for "Horseface" (the name comes from the Trump insult against Stormy Daniels) has been completed. The show premiered in Orlando in 2019 and has played in Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton and Victoria.

"The show came about after #MeToo and the Weinstein trial. I became so enraged about what was being revealed about women's lives that I started to reflect on my own in relation to the way I have been treated by men — teachers, boyfriends, strangers — and I put that rage and comedy into a show."

The show's success and Donald Trump's 34 felony convictions are their own publicity. That "Horseface" won Best in Show awards in Ottawa and Orlando helps.

The Kurin-Phillips-Rowe collaboration also has its origin in the headlines.

"The show is (loosely and unfortunately) inspired by the bizarre real-life case of the 'Swiss Cheese Pervert,' a man who made headlines in Philadelphia in the early 2010s for his ... dairy-centric public indecency," Rowe said. "We took that strange but true headline and ran it through a feminist glow-up of corporate greed, environmental collapse, and Canada's most ridiculously powerful inter-



Megan Phillips and the team behind "Cheese Pervert" takes the show to the mother church of Fringe festivals, in Edinburgh, in August.

MEGAN PHILLIPS

est group, the dairy lobby."

In their case, as well as with Dallas and Morton, collaboration seems to be the key to a successful production. Randall even found that as well as working solo was going, collaborating has kicked it up a notch.

Randall had worked on "Sister Sophia" for several years, "monologue by monologue" (even writing three songs for it) before she showed some of them to another friend, Kate Johnston, an award-winning filmmaker.

"She asked questions I hadn't thought of," which proved helpful in finding the arc of the story.

As for Morton, he's been working with Hamilton musician Chris Cracknell for more than 20 years. "It's usually his playing Robin to my Batman, but instead, this time, it's me as Robin to his Batman."

Their play has what can be described as a uniquely Fringe title: "A Non-Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura: Mistress of B-Roll." It's based on a 12-episode YouTube series Cracknell created about the gaming world.

The Fringe play is "noncanonical," meaning audience members don't have to be gamers or know the web series to follow the story line, which is about self-discovery,

gender identity and the complexities of life. Also uniquely Fringe.

The collaboration between Cracknell and his four actors, two of whom are transgender and new to the stage, is a "creative act of faith, like jumping off a cliff and hoping it will come out OK," Morton said.

The team behind "Cheese Pervert" takes the show to the mother church of Fringe festivals, to Edinburgh, in August. They, too, have worked together for some time, first connecting while filming a short comedy, "Break Up Time Machine."

They quickly discovered a shared comedic sensibility rooted in absurdism, a mutual disdain for nepo babies, and a love/hate relationship with therapy, Rowe said.

After the show's been written, cast and rehearsed, there's the small matter of publicity. Hamilton Festival Theatre Co., the Fringe's parent organization, has organized online meetings with producers to guide them in getting the word out.

"The Fringe's job is to get 200 people out to the Fringe every day. Your job is to convince those 200 people to catch your show at 4 o'clock," Morton said.

Yet, in the end, it still comes down to the work itself, what the playwright, director and actor leave on the stage.

Everyone else is invited along for the ride. How uniquely Fringe.

RAYMOND BEAUCHEMIN IS A HAMILTON WRITER. HIS PLAY "3 HOURS, 10 MINUTES" WILL BE PERFORMED AT THE HAMILTON FRINGE FESTIVAL THIS YEAR.

## POOKAMHURA REVIEWS FROM THE 2025 HAMILTON FRINGE: "Pull quotes"

"I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed this original musical with songs by Chris Cracknell and book by Brian Morton. The investment of time and creativity into its storytelling is undeniable and considerable, from its thoughtful, melodic ballads to its choreography, detailed visuals, and ultimately, the poignant beating heart at its centre. This is truly an ensemble piece, and the cast can be very proud of their efforts". - Alison M. Jones, Hamilton City Magazine.

"POOKAMHURA has it all. The original music, written by Chris Cracknell, will have you clapping and laughing, the choreography and lore are rich, the dwarves are mighty!" - Crystal Rose Haygarth, The Hammer Monthly.

"With a mix of music stylings from folk rock to country, A NON CANONICAL MUSICAL ADVENTURE WITH POOKAMHURA: MISTRESS OF B-ROLL shows some great potential. There's songs about heartache, love triangles and longing to be somewhere where people understand you. Some songs are silly and some are quite emotional. Both have a place in this musical. There are some beautiful harmonies throughout and with so many skilled musicians in the cast, that comes as no surprise." Amanda Cosby Nesbitt, Steel City Reviews.

"As an avid gamer myself, I was already looking forward to POOKAMHURA: MISTRESS OF B-ROLL, but it still managed to exceed my expectations. What begins as four people playing a video game grows into something beautiful, exploring themes of escapism, creativity, identity, prejudice and self-acceptance. This show is a must-see for anyone; even if you've never touched a video game in your life, I would still highly recommend it." - Arthur Bullock, The Vibe.

"POOKAMHURA: MISTRESS OF B-ROLL is a must-see at the 2025 Hamilton Fringe Festival. This inventive 70-minute musical blends gaming culture with theatrical flair, offering a bold, imaginative experience unlike anything else on the Fringe stage. This is what the Fringe is all about; taking risks, pushing creative boundaries, and exploring new storytelling possibilities. POOKAMHURA is a unique and rewarding experience. It's fun, it's smart, and it's full of heart. Don't miss it." - Ray Z Rivers, The Hammer.

## POOKAMHURA REVIEWS FROM THE 2025 HAMILTON FRINGE:

Steel City Reviews

REVIEW: A Non Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura: Mistress of B-Roll

Written By Amanda Cosby - Nesbitt

Age Suitability: Parental Guidance (ages 13+)

Genre: Theatre—Drama, Musical/Concert/Opera

Run Time: 70 mins

Venue: The Staircase | Studio Theatre

In a refreshing new production from Theatre Erebus, a random group of MMORPG (massively multi-player online role playing game) players meet a gnome rogue named Pookamhura as they wait for another player to join them for a dungeon adventure. During the wait, they reflect on their shared history as gamers and people, using original songs, heart and humour. Once one of their players confesses something deeply personal, tensions rise and forces the group to confront their prejudices.

With a mix of music stylings from folk rock to country, A Non Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura: Mistress of B-Roll shows some great potential. The musical elements are well scored although lyrically are a bit repetitive. Each song cleverly reveals some truth to the characters in real life. There's songs about heartache, love triangles and longing to be somewhere where people understand you. Some songs are silly and some are quite emotional. Both have a place in this musical. There are some beautiful harmonies throughout and with so many skilled musicians in the cast, that comes as no surprise.

An unexpected highlight of this production is the incredibly detailed video design work by Chris Cracknell. Hours of work has been put into the RPG elements of the show as the game characters mimic the choreography in the background and almost look like they are lip-syncing along to each song. Sometimes it distracts from the live performance but by no means in a detrimental way. It is very impressive work enhancing the world building and allowing an immersive experience for the audience.

The cast are enthusiastic and support one another through the various scenes and musical numbers (and huge recognition to the show's choreographer Mason Micevski who stepped in to fill a role in the show the day before opening). Emily Bolyea is perfectly cast as the passionate Pook. Chris Cracknell gives a layered performance as Tank and newcomer Francis Wallace captures our hearts as Hunter/Robin. The enormous energy from these four actors seems suffocated by the small space on stage and forces them to keep their choreographed movements tight and their deliveries, at times, restrained. If this production ever remounts, a larger space should allow these performances to really shine. Given the circumstances this company faced so close to opening, I firmly believe that the show, as a whole, will strengthen with more exposure to receptive audiences, and assist with their timing and confidence overall.

A Non Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura: Mistress of B-Roll explores themes of self-discovery, acceptance, and the complexities of life's adventures. It provides some accessible insight into the world of online gaming, using song and dance to carve out its important message about stereotypes, stigmas, bigotry and finding a community that sees you beyond the character you play as. Be sure to check it out and support this new musical endeavour.

A Non-Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura: Mistress of B-Roll

Reviewed by Arthur Bullock

The vibe of A Non-Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura: Mistress of B-Roll is "being yourself."

Video games might be a recent addition to modern society, but the desire to escape into a fantasy world and imagine something magical has resonated with people for as long as stories have existed. Pookamhura takes us on a multimedia musical adventure with four World of Warcraft players, and the conversation that unfolds between them when a lull in the game's action gets them talking to pass the time.

The story is first presented on a projector screen, using footage from WoW combined with video editing and voice-overs. The focus then shifts to the story's four main characters, each one seated in a computer chair in front of an image of their in-game character. During regular dialogue, the game footage remains stationary, and the focus is on the physical actors. When a song starts, however, the actors' singing and dancing are paired up with a music video made using more gameplay.

The production quality is exceptional throughout: great acting, great music, and great choreography. It's a skillful blend of physical and digital, and it demonstrates a sense of familiarity both with World of Warcraft and with musical theatre. What I find especially notable is how active it all is, especially given the subject matter. Given that the show is about a video game, it would have been easy to have the performers simply sit still and speak — "talking heads," as it's sometimes called. This show doesn't do that, though; the use of musical numbers means that characters are regularly getting up and moving around, and even when they're sitting down, everyone is lively and animated.

As an avid gamer myself, I was already looking forward to this show, but it still managed to exceed my expectations. What begins as four people playing a video game grows into something beautiful, exploring themes of escapism, creativity, identity, prejudice and self-acceptance. This show is a must-see for anyone; even if you've never touched a video game in your life, I would still highly recommend it.

Event Details

Age Suitability: Parental Guidance (ages 13+)

Genre: Theatre—Drama, Musical/Concert/Opera

Run Time: 70 mins

Venue: The Staircase | Studio Theatre

A random group of MMO players meets Pookamhura, a gnome rogue inspired by Shakespeare's Puck, as they wait for another player to join them for a dungeon adventure. During the wait, they reflect on their shared history as gamers and people, using original songs and humour.

One player reveals a secret that causes tension and challenges the group, forcing them to confront their prejudices and make difficult choices. The story explores themes of self-discovery, identity, and the complexities of life's adventures.

A new musical by  
Chris Cracknell

Book and stage direction by  
Brian Morton

Cast  
Emily Bolyea, Francis Wallace, Jelena Vermilion, Mason Micevski

Warnings: Coarse Language

## POOKAMHURA REVIEWS FROM THE 2025 HAMILTON FRINGE:

A Non-Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura:  
Mistress of B-Roll

Staircase Studio Theatre

If you're a fan of video games, animation, and original music, "A Non-Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura: Mistress of B-Roll" is a must-see at the 2025 Hamilton Fringe Festival. This inventive 70-minute musical blends gaming culture with theatrical flair, offering a bold, imaginative experience unlike anything else on the Fringe stage.

Set in a stylized World of Warcraft-inspired universe, the show features stunning animation projected on a large screen, enhancing the immersive fantasy world. Strong vocal performances from Emily Bolyea and show creator/composer Chris Cracknell add emotional depth and energy to the performance. The songs are catchy, character-driven, and perfectly woven into the game-inspired setting. The dialogue brings plenty of humour too, with playful banter and clever nods to gaming culture that had the audience chuckling throughout.

Director Brian Morton and producer Donald Cudmore deserve praise for orchestrating such a technically ambitious production. The coordination between live actors and animated visuals is smooth and engaging; no small feat. Every detail, from costume design to sound mixing, contributes to the show's impressive production values.

While the show begins as a lighthearted, whimsical adventure, its emotional impact sneaks up on you. In the final twenty minutes, the story takes a moving turn with the character arc of "Hunter/Robin," played by Francis Wallace. Their journey toward self-discovery and identity reveals the show's true emotional core. Wallace's performance is heartfelt and affecting, delivering a poignant message about authenticity and acceptance that lingers long after the final scene.

The audience at the performance I attended was clearly captivated, rewarding the cast with genuine and enthusiastic applause. This is what the Fringe is all about; taking risks, pushing creative boundaries, and exploring new storytelling possibilities.

"Pookamhura: Mistress of B-Roll" is a unique and rewarding experience. It's fun, it's smart, and it's full of heart. Don't miss it.

- Ray Z Rivers, The Hammer

HAMILTON CITY MAGAZINE

"A Non Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura:  
Mistress of B-Roll

Music: Chris Cracknell

Book and stage direction: Brian Morton

Cast: Emily Bolyea, Francis Wallace, Jelena Vermilion,  
Mason Micevski

Venue: The Staircase | Studio Theatre -- Until July 27

Perusing the material for this show, I wasn't at all sure I was its intended audience. Sure, I grew up loving video games, but my all-time favourite is Pac-Man and my familiarity with gaming trailed off around the turn of the last century. Certainly there were others in the audience who caught more of the gaming in-jokes but I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed this original musical with songs by Chris Cracknell and book by Brian Morton.

The investment of time and creativity into its storytelling is undeniable and considerable, from its thoughtful, melodic ballads to its choreography, detailed visuals, and ultimately, the poignant beating heart at its centre. Four performers initially sit with backs to the audience in high-backed gaming chairs with rapid-fire commentary as a multiplayer video game projects on a screen. Gradually we get to know the characters and their players in a series of songs and conversations.

The musical raises some fascinating ideas about gaming and virtual reality as safe spaces for those whose real lives are subject to judgement and danger, and the resentment of some to the encroaching of those realities into their virtual worlds. This is truly an ensemble piece, and the cast can be very proud of their efforts.

- Alison Jones

THE HAMMER MONTHLY:

A Non-Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura:  
Mistress of B-Roll

Staircase Studio Theatre

Are you looking for dwarves, paladins, mages, music, adventure, and the bond between friends known only through the magic of the internet? Pookamhura has it all.

We find our four intrepid adventurers in their gaming chairs, headphones on, mid-raid and through both song and story we follow them as they face battles not only with mobs but also with wait times, guild politics, and even battles IRL.

The original music, written by Chris Cracknell, will have you clapping and laughing, the choreography and lore are rich, the dwarves are mighty. We see our heroes not only as they are represented on stage by our vibrant actors but also in-game through the use of extensive projection.

Although audience members with experience in MMORPG gaming will definitely catch many references; no levels in gaming are required to have an excellent time. Log in to the world of Pookamhura for adventure, song, laughs, and friendship.

- Crystal Rose Haygarth

# The play's still the thing, but promotion sure helps

RAYMOND BEAUCHEMIN

About halfway through this year's Hamilton Fringe Festival, executive director Christopher Stanton, sitting under a canopy on a closed-off portion of King William Street called "Fringe Boulevard," said he

believed the festival had found its "sweet spot."

Producers, artists and Fringe staffers at the fest's dozen host venues indicated that plays were getting solid audiences, not sold out necessarily, but well-attended nonetheless. The festival, Stanton

said, seemed to have found the right balance between the number of theatrical offerings, including on-the-street performances, and the number of times each play was scheduled.

A final, more thorough examination won't be ready until October,

**Lessons learned from this year's Fringe Festival**

Stanton said, after the festival had run its 12-day course. But interviews with some actors, playwrights and producers — and based on my own experience as writer and director of a Fringe play this year and as a reviewer of a half-

SEE FRINGE G2

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 13, 2025 THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

## G2 | ARTS & LIFE

### Fringe

CONTINUED FROM G1

dozen shows for a Hamilton arts website — shone some light on lessons learned.

The theme that perhaps encapsulated the experience of the interviewees was one of promotion: How do you "sell" the play to a potential audience and get "bums in seats," as one veteran Fringer said. Especially when yours is one of 53 plays, each with a minimum of six performances over a week and a half.

Should Thomas Bates have changed his pitch for "Mark I," a modern-language retelling of the first part of the Gospel of Mark? Only four people were in the audience for his opening performance at the Gasworks. I thought the performance was stellar; although the words were familiar to a lifelong Catholic, I believed I'd never heard them that way before.

The marketing didn't change and the review didn't seem to help. There were maybe six people at the last show. Bates performs "Mark I" at the Nanaimo Fringe Festival next week.

Among shows that had the opposite experience, in terms of audience numbers, was "The Damage Done," directed by Matthew Willson and starring Rebecca Durance Hine and Adam Lemieux. Hine was happy with the show but, upon some reflection, thought its promotion could have been tweaked.

The script, by award-winning playwright George F. Walker, is the third in a trilogy about a couple, Tina and Bobby, who meet as teens, get pregnant, marry, get pregnant again, split and ... keep circling back to each other.

"It seems like it really touched a lot of people," Durance Hine said last week. "The response we got the most often was that people saw something of themselves and their own life in one or both of the characters."

The play was a creative challenge because of its emotional range, but also because it's so physical: Bobby and Tina tangle with each other a couple of times, once on a park swing.

"With so many content warnings with this show, I think we were so concerned with ensuring that everyone was prepared for those parts going in that we forgot to highlight the humour of the piece as well ... They are so human, Tina and Bobby, and just as we can empathize with their struggles, we can



Liz Buchanan in "Liz: A Traumatic Comedy." "It was a very personal one-woman show in a small venue, so the fact that we had as much audience as we did was impressive," she said.

also laugh at their banter, their sarcasm, their good-natured (and sometimes not-so-good-natured) ribbing of one another," Durance Hine said.

I found promotion an issue as well. My play, "3 Hours, 10 Minutes," examined the connection we have to art and to each other in an age full of digital distraction. That pitch wasn't going to cut it. But then I realized how I had structured the 20-minute play. It was a Hallmark movie! There's the meet-cute, the couple's growing interest in each other, the eventual misunderstanding and potential break, and then a rapprochement. It worked.

Audience size grew in the last week of performances to the point that on the last night we had to ask permission to allow more people in the venue.

Brian Morton, a Fringe veteran who often writes plays with a nod to Hamilton history, wrote the book and directed "A Non-Canonical Musical Adventure with Pookamhura, Mistress of B-Roll," a rollicking, imaginative take on identity and reality.

"This particular production appealed to a community of video gamers, who are not particularly known for buying theatre tickets. Whereas people who are history buffs, definitely like to attend the theatre," Morton said. Yet, the afternoon I saw the play, the Staircase Studio Theatre was packed.

"In terms of promotion, the big-

gest difference between this year's Fringe and previous ones was actually the algorithms around social media such as Facebook. They have definitely changed things so that it's a pay-to-play model. When I would share a social media post only about six people would see it," Morton said. "I contrast that with 2018 when a lot of the people who bought tickets learned about (Morton's show that year) simply from my social media posts."

Almost half of this year's plays were one-person shows; many others featured only two actors. Keeping the lid on the number of performers can help a bottom line; it can also lead to a more intimate engagement with the audience.

"Liz: A Traumatic Comedy," by writer Liz Buchanan, deals with the Hamilton actor's love of performance, her teenage-imagined destiny on stage and the abuse she endured at the hands of a man in the local theatre scene.

"It was a very personal one-woman show in a small venue, so the fact that we had as much audience as we did was impressive," Buchanan said. "I was extremely anxious going into it that I had chosen to make myself vulnerable, that it was too big a risk to share so much of myself in my art. I felt that taking the risk served the story I wanted to tell and the importance of the issue I wanted to highlight."

Lesson learned here: The risk Buchanan took paid off, but "I don't



Lisa Randall and Brian Morton.

RAY BEAUCHEMIN



Rebecca Durance Hine was happy with "The Damage Done" but, upon some reflection, thought its promotion could have been tweaked.

JULIE MARCHAND

know if I would do something as personal again, for Fringe or otherwise. I think I would like my next few projects to be a lot more silly and fun. Certainly less intense!"

Another lesson Buchanan took away from Fringe: Although "Liz" was a one-woman show, she had a team behind her — producer Renata Ona, director David Faulkner-Rundle, and stage manager Vanessa Rundle-Fotheringham.

"To put on a show that effectively is a lot more work than I think a lot of people realize," Buchanan said. "You don't just get up on stage and start unloading about your life."

Sage advice I heard loudly: I entered Fringe with "3 Hours, 10 Minutes" not thinking I needed a director, producer, stage manager, publicist or financier. I sought advice, for sure, but the bulk of direction, publicity and fundraising fell to me.

Next time? Build a team, rely on them, and remember: The show will go on.

RAYMOND BEAUCHEMIN IS A FORMER TORSTAR EDITOR. HIS PLAY "3 HOURS, 10 MINUTES" WON BEST IN VENUE FOR THE MINIBAR SERIES. IT WILL BE REMOUNTED NOV. 22 AT THE ART GALLERY OF HAMILTON.

## BUSTED IN HAMILTON, McMaster sex film resurfaces in Fringe play

'Columbus of Sex,' a 1969 roller-coaster ride, considered a feast of flesh, has resurfaced as part of a new play, 'The Night They Raided McMaster'



GARY SMITH  
OPINION

Why does any playwright become involved with a story?

What makes him chase the facts of something that happened long ago?

Hamilton playwright Brian Morton has always had tenacity. He will search out the relevant details of an event, chart its relevance for today and turn it into a compelling drama.

"I first heard about this story in 1989," Morton says. "I was interested because it happened in this city. A sex film made at McMaster by members of the McMaster Film Board in 1969 was seized by police, deemed obscene by the court and ordered destroyed."

That's what Morton's new play "The Night They Raided McMaster" is about. It's also about what constitutes artistic license and freedom.

"The focus of my play is on writer John Hofsess. He wrote a very good article in "Saturday Night Magazine" about the Hamilton trial and the verdict that was passed down. He was also the director and writer of the film 'Columbus of Sex.'"

It showed gay and straight adults in various sexual positions. Young and attractive bodies, kissing, touching and exploring each other. It was about trying to attain the perfect sexual experience.

In that era, The McMaster Film Board had a group of young men including Eugene Levy, Bryce Kanbara, Jim Chambers and Tom Laling, all with some skill in cinematography. The board existed for 10 years and Ivan Reitman, one of its major success stories, went on to a film career in Hollywood making popular movies such as "Ghostbusters" in 1984 and "Kindergarten Cop" in 1990.

Though the 90-minute film "Columbus of Sex" was ordered destroyed, parts of it somehow survived. Those are what helped Morton fashion his play about sex, art, repression and politics.

Morton, a fixture in Hamilton theatre circles, was four in 1969. Now, 53 years later, he has written a play that examines this local story.

"Why does the story attract me? It's something about the nature of obsession," Morton says. "Why do we pick certain stories and follow them through to the end? I don't know. We just do."

SEE THEATRE, G2



Chris Cracknell, left, Brian Morton, and Greg Cruickshank in the Theatre Erebus production of 'The Night They Raided McMaster,' part of the 2022 Hamilton Fringe Festival, at the Zoetic Theatre.

JIM CHAMBERS

### MOTHERLODE

#### Theatre

CONTINUED FROM G1

In wanting to tell the story of the prosecution of young filmmakers in a Hamilton courtroom in 1970, he chased the story, eventually acquiring access to what is left of the film.

In his stage version of this Hamilton story, Morton alludes to the sweeping changes in community standards, and the sexual revolution in film and television content, that allows far more graphic images to be shown today.

Morton takes three major players in this story, Hofsess, the writer and director of the film, and Ivan Reitman and Danny Goldberg, its producers, and builds his story around them.

Actors Gregory Cruickshank and Chris Cracknell appear, along with Morton himself, in the play.

"In my play, we are screening parts of the film for the very first time since Aug. 8, 1969 when it was shown in McMaster's Chester New Hall and the police raided the place."

Details of the facts of the "Columbus of Sex" debacle were brought to light in writer, filmmaker, film preservationist, historian and publisher Dr. Stephen Broomer's book, "Hamilton Babylon — A History of the McMaster Film Board," published in 2016.

"Broomer's detailed research, which took decades, and his film restoration work, has made a version of the John Hofsess film available again. Without the elements he has provided to my production, it would not be possible to stage it," Morton says. "Truthfully, that any of the lost film has survived is incredible."

Morton is clearly fascinated by the story and the film itself.

"I'm not offended by nudity," Morton says. What has survived looks like images of fine art nudes, black and white figures and lots of shadows. I think amazingly Broomer has constructed some idea of what the film might have been like. He calls it 'speculative reconstruction.'"

I suppose you could apply that term to Morton's play as well.

Woven into the factual elements he has pieced together from true accounts of events, is a kind of commentary on where we were in 1969 and where we are now.

Interestingly "Columbus of Sex" was the first Canadian film ever charged with obscenity in a court of law. And to think it happened here in Hamilton.

Fascinating? You bet. GARY SMITH HAS WRITTEN ABOUT THEATRE AND DANCE FOR THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR FOR 40 YEARS. GSMITH@COGECO.CA

#### BRIAN MORTON

**What** Theatre Erebus Inc.'s 'The Night They Raided McMaster,' presented as part of the 2022 Hamilton Fringe Festival

**Where** Zoetic Theatre, 526 Concession St.

**When** July 21, 6:30 p.m.; July 23, 7 p.m.; July 24, 12 p.m.; July 27, 9:30 p.m.; July 28, 6 p.m.; July 30, 5 p.m. and July 31, 3:30 p.m.

**Tickets** \$12 plus \$5 mandatory Fringe Festival Button at the door. Online \$18.75 including button and fees. Go to [hftco.ca](http://hftco.ca) or call 289-698-2234

**Protocols** No masks required.



SCAN THIS CODE FOR MORE ON LOCAL THEATRE AND PLAYS BY GARY SMITH

most important part of traveling by car.

The mindset of the driver. We did a lot of road trips when I was a kid. We'd go to the cottage a lot and every few years we'd go to Saskatchewan to visit my grandparents so my grandmother could tell my mother how badly we behaved. We were well behaved; she just

SEE MOTHERLODE, G2





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LIFE-SAVING IMPACT G5



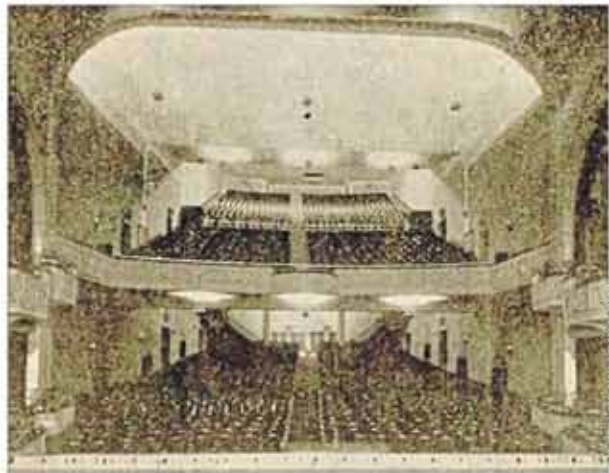
WHO IS AMERICA? G4



2018 FRINGE FESTIVAL



Susan Robinson, left, play Ethel Rosevere, Larry Smith is Loring Smith, and Claire Shingleton-Smith is Cecile Bartley, in Brian Morton's play "Under the Apple Tree."



Interior of the old Lyric theatre.



UNDER THE APPLE TREE

**WHERE**  
Fringe Festival — Zoetic Theatre  
526 Concession St.

**WHEN**  
July 20 at 8 p.m.  
July 21 at 10 p.m.  
July 22 at 7:30 p.m.  
July 24 at 8 p.m.  
July 27 at 4:30 p.m.  
July 29 at 6:30 p.m.

**TICKETS**  
\$10 + \$5 for the required Fringe Backer Button  
Online:  
hamiltonfringe.ca/tickets  
At the door 1 hour before shows

Brian Morton with a light from the Lyric Theatre in Hamilton.

Under the Apple Tree

Brian Morton's Vaudeville recreation is both homage to the genre and the palatial theatres of its day in Hamilton



OPINION

GARY SMITH

THE DANCERS COUNT the beat to an old Vaudeville tune. Plunked out on the ivories it urges them to dance faster. Standing behind a pop-eyed singer with the charm of Eddie Cantor, they bounce mechanically to the music. As actor Larry Smith's voice rises to a strident pitch they flutter like frenzied butterflies

"I gotta have, I gotta have, I gotta have, I gotta have the girl," he screeches.

Going down on one knee like Al Jolson he waves a battered old hat. You might not know these stage names, but they were big Vaudeville stars and popular later in films and on TV too. In the slightly off-kilter world of stage excess, where songs about sex masqueraded as songs about love, they charmed the punters sitting in theatres like Hamilton's once grand Lyric Theatre.

"I'll Be With You In Apple Blossom Time," may have seemed a pretty little ditty, but in Brian Morton's

musical "Under the Apple Tree" it's a raucous celebration of female pulchritude.

We're in a once grand theatre on Mary Street, just off King in downtown Hamilton. Though reduced to rubble in 2010, the Lyric was once a starry home for Vaudeville's two-a-day shows.

In 1921 it was also the place where someone put real bullets in a prop gun and shot pretty little Cecile Bartley. Was she murdered, or did she

live to sing and dance again?

That question and many others fascinated Hamilton playwright Morton. That's why he's recreated the Vaudeville sketch "Under the Apple Tree" that was performed Nov. 25 1921.

In many ways the show is an homage to vintage theatre, to the old-time Vaudeville palaces where such theatre played, and to the way reality can be more powerful than stage histrionics.

"I've woven all the tiny details I could find to recreate the act. I found a 1911 book called, 'How To Write For Vaudeville,' and that was helpful too."

**BRIAN MORTON**  
Playwright, "Under the Apple Tree"

VAUDEVILLE continues // G3

VAUDEVILLE continued from // G1

"I'VE ALWAYS LOVED old theatres," Morton says, as he watches his cast go through their paces. "As a kid I used to sit in the Century Theatre (formerly The Lyric) and I watched movies. I grew very interested in the theatre's past. For many years I lusted after that place. I wanted to save it. The theatre's loss was a classic example of demolition by neglect. Property standards were not enforced, so though the building was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act it came down in 2010."

Like the Palace, Capital, Savoy and Grand Opera House, all wonderful old Hamilton entertainment palaces, it was destroyed by the fallout of the blight city council mistakenly once called urban renewal.

Watching the bricks and mortar fall to the street, the Lyric became a powerful image that has haunted Morton ever since. Before it was reduced to rubble, he went through the decaying building with a flashlight. He saw the old balcony hidden by a false wall. He saw the remains of the performers' dressing rooms and the once gilded proscenium arch. He even rescued a vintage theatre arc light, left over from Vaudeville days.

Now, all these years later, he's been moved to write a play set in that once grand palace of entertainment. The play came from exhaustive research Morton did about the Vaudeville era.

"I first heard of the story of a shooting at the Lyric in a May 1979 Spector article. Then in 2008, I found a Hamilton Herald story from Nov. 1921 that at last revealed the details of the rumour about a Hamilton murder."

Most of the facts for Morton's play have come from trolling through historical newspapers.

"One of the things the play reveals is how news, including false versions of events, get reported and then are never corrected. It was not until last fall that I found in US Census data from 1930 that Cecile Bartley actually survived the shooting."

Morton says recreating some idea of the actual Vaudeville act "Under the Apple Tree" was difficult.

"I've woven all the tiny details I could find to recreate the act. I found a 1911 book called 'How To Write For Vaudeville,' and that was helpful too. I also did lots of online searches for period sheet music and I watched documentaries and film clips from the Vaudeville era."

Using public-domain songs, some of which were in the very sketch Morton is reproducing, lends a whiff of authenticity to the play.

Working with actors who basically knew nothing about Vaudeville posed a challenge for Morton.

"It required discussion, watching old films and immersing the actors in a very different entertainment world," he says.

"Producing theatre is an act of faith. The fact is I know very little about these characters, so my versions of them are constructs. As a playwright, whatever you don't know you invent. And the play asks more questions about the real characters than it answers."

"I don't claim to have much experience in creating this kind of musical theatre, but then that's the joy of The Fringe, it allows you to work on projects outside your comfort zone."

Morton is trying to reconstruct a Vaudeville tabloid musical, essentially a "girlie act" within the framing device of a sordid murder, or attempted murder. In some ways it's both a tribute to Vaudeville and to those old theatres in Hamilton that were smashed down to make parking lots and strip malls.

"I still mourn the destruction of the Century (Lyric) all these years later," Morton says. "But I couldn't save it."

Perhaps at least part of Morton's new musical rose out of the grief he still feels for that old building. Perhaps too, it helps to celebrate a time when beautiful entertainment palaces dotted the downtown of this city as they still do in Toronto.

Gary Smith has written on theatre and dance for *The Hamilton Spectator* for more than 35 years. Special to *The Hamilton Spectator*

The cast rehearses Brian Morton's play "Under the Apple Tree." The new musical explores a bit of bygone real life local history. A "jazz era" Hamilton, that is gone, but not forgotten.



Chris Cracknell plays the theatre manager James Wall.



Larry Smith plays Loring Smith and Susan Robinson plays Ethel Rosevere in Brian Morton's play Under the Apple Tree.



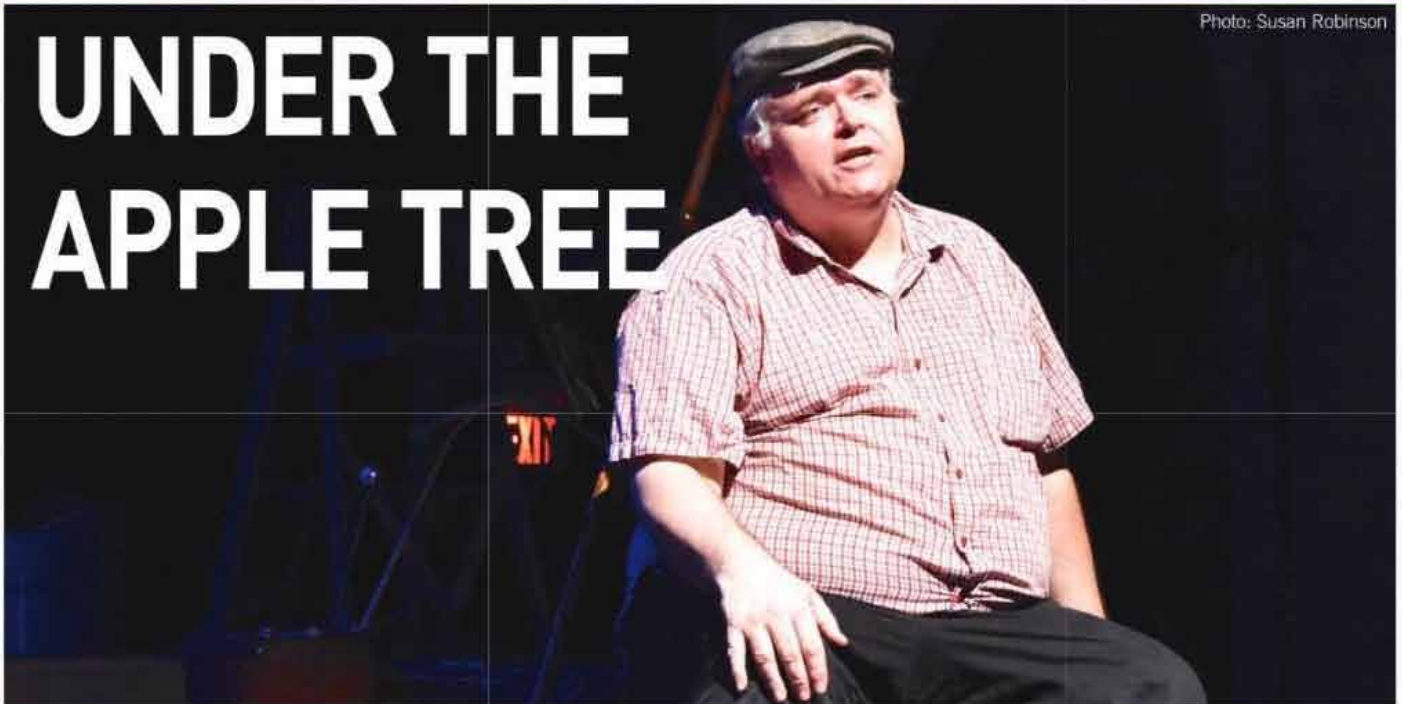
The Century Theatre.

Now, all these years later, he's been moved to write a play set in that once grand palace of entertainment.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN RENNISON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Photo: Susan Robinson

# UNDER THE APPLE TREE



PLAYWRIGHT AND DIRECTOR Brian Morton had a twofold motivation when it came to *Under the Apple Tree*, set to begin its second run at The Pearl Company. For one, Morton is known for his encyclopedic knowledge of Hamilton's theatres and cinemas, able to spin yarn after yarn about them all. The tale behind this production took place in a now demolished theatre on Mary Street near King. "[It's] a tribute to my favorite building in the city, the Century Theatre, which was abandoned for 30 years after Famous Players closed it as a cinema in September 1989".

"The most fascinating thing I learned was that Hamilton was a great [city on the] touring circuit!" says cast member Claire Shingleton-Smith. "It's hard to imagine that our steel city was booming with 10,000 theatre patrons daily, and that all four of our grand theatres have since been demolished."

The musical was also motivated by Morton's need to process the loss of a dear friend, Robin Pittis, local theatre booster (and former *View* writer). "I had done the research on the story more than ten years ago, but what made it into a stage play...[was trying] to understand the circumstances in which people choose to end their life."

Morton says his "own mental health is better when I am working on a production." And, there have been many of them. Not only is this Morton's seventh production as playwright, he's directed about two dozen shows, and performed in about 40. All told, he's been involved in "over 200 productions...since 1979." Morton performs in *Under the Apple Tree*, in addition to being its playwright, director, and producer.

The musical centres on the lead up to the 1921 shooting of chorus girl Cecile Bartley by troubled stage hand Jack Grubb, backstage during the run of a musical comedy act that hit the stage of the Hamilton theatre formerly known as The Lyric.

When he was writing the script, Brian says he was not yet aware of "the whole 'incel' thing," referring to the toxic, misogynist and often violent network of men who feel sexually disenfranchised and angry at the world. They've been implicated in more than one recent domestic terrorist attack in the United States and Canada. He can see the similarities between such men and a historical character like Jack Grubb.

"It would have been very easy to have written Grubb, as a monster, a right bastard... I filtered some of what [friends] had told me [about their own experiences] through the character. There is so very little historical record to base the play on, so whatever you don't know, you invent."

I saw *Under the Apple Tree* in its premiere run at The Zoetic during this summer's Hamilton Fringe. It's evolved since then with a new ending, longer opening monologue, and a new song. The changes have been fuelled by feedback from Fringe audiences, and differences in staging the production at The Pearl rather than as a Fringe play.

"I think the most challenging part of the production for all of us has been to really take care with the story and the theme - to do justice to the characters we are playing and tell

their story in a way that it deserves to be told," Claire Shingleton-Smith says. "With the first [run] of the show, we realized that the voice of my character 'Cecile' became somewhat lost. The new edition of the show aims to tackle her story, particularly the ending, in a new light."

Shingleton-Smith initially responded to an online casting notice Morton had posted, sharing a phone conversation about the project as well as their many local theatre connections. "Brian realized he'd reviewed a Fringe show ['Last Call'] I had been in the year before," she recounts. "He told me there would be no need for an audition, and offered me a spot in the show."

"The most fun was learning the songs," Claire enthuses. "They are all written by the same composer and lyricist from the period of the show, and most have likely not been performed since the 1920s!"

Another cast member, Chris Cracknell, has been friends with director Morton since 1990. They bonded over gaming and their mutual passion for music. A musician for over four decades, Cracknell says Morton has reached out on multiple occasions over the years when he's needed an actor, musician, or composer. The shooting was a story Cracknell had heard from Morton long ago. "It sounded like it would make for a good play at the time, so when he eventually wrote the play I was keen to be part of it," he says. While the high energy and intensity of the old time musical score holds some physical challenges for Cracknell, he says it's always fun to work on a new project with friends. *Under the Apple Tree* also includes the vivid stage presence of Larry Smith, as well as the talents of Susan Robinson, Michelle LaHaise and Erynn Garland.

Following this month's remount, Morton plans to apply to the 2019 Hamilton Fringe and continue work on another original play. Cracknell will be performing with his band, Babbage Industries; coincidentally, the band is set to play tonight (Thursday) at Shaolin Underground at the afterparty for the 5th Annual Hamilton Independent Media Awards. And, after a hectic year in some widely diverse productions, Shingleton-Smith is taking a breather until next spring. "Next summer I hope to return to OnTRAC to facilitate and perform in another production at Beaver Creek Institution. I've worked with OnTRAC for the past two years putting on two major productions within a men's minimum security prison."

There will be a special 'talk back' session after the November 25th matinee performance of *Under the Apple Tree*, which marks "the 97th anniversary of the actual shooting of Cecile Bartley..." ▼

## UNDER THE APPLE TREE

Theatre Erebus' *Under the Apple Tree*

Nov. 22 - 24 and Nov. 29 - Dec. 1

Doors: 7:30 PM; Show: 8 PM

Matinees: Nov. 25, 5 PM and Dec. 2, 2 PM

The Pearl Company

16 Steven St., Hamilton

Tickets: \$20 general; \$15 students/seniors/un[der]waged

Tickets online at [www.ticketscene.ca](http://www.ticketscene.ca), or at the door

AVIVA BOXER: Go editor  
905-526-3235, aboxer@thespec.com

WHO WHAT WEAR G7



\$780 WEDDING G8



A SHODDY MAGICIAN IN A PARKING LOT



HOW I BECAME CANADIAN

# Hamilton Fringe Festival is bursting at the seams

Annual event celebrates 15 years with 53 shows



PARA DOS

## THE HAMILTON FRINGE FESTIVAL

**WHERE**  
Various venues around the city

**WHEN**  
Kickoff performances: July 18  
July 19 to 29

**TICKETS**  
\$8 to \$12  
Service charges may apply  
One-time \$5 Backer's Button required

**BUY ONLINE**  
hamiltonfringe.ca/tickets  
Various package deals available from Fringe site for multiple shows

**AT THE DOOR OF EACH VENUE**  
1 hour before showtime

**KICKOFF PARTY**  
Lincoln Alexander Centre  
160 King St. E.  
July 17 at 7:30 p.m.  
Doors open at 7 p.m.



THEATRE

**GARY SMITH**

### THE BUZZ IS BIG.

The 15th Anniversary edition of the Hamilton Fringe Festival is bursting at the seams. With 53 shows there are hard choices to make.

There's everything from dance, opera, comedy, magic and music. Shows are coming from as far away as Argentina and Saskatchewan. And some are coming from just down the street.

With so many productions how do you choose what to see?

You ask Rose Hopkins, of course. Associate producer of the 2018 Fringe, Hopkins has the skinny on everything that's fringy.

"It's going to be terrific," she says. "Bigger than ever, with more social events surrounding performances. You'll be able to feel a part of the whole thing. There's a big kickoff party at Lincoln Alexander Centre where you can see 90-second teasers

of most of the shows. It's a chance to make up your mind, to decide what is hot. After the kickoff you can go to the Redchurch Cafe and Gallery, 68 King St. E. to extend your evening. This new Fringe Club is at the east end of Gore Park. You can eat, drink and mingle with performers and other Fringe customers. It's very people friendly," Hopkins adds.

This year, the Fringe is going up the hill. Well, up the Mountain to be precise. For the first time there will be shows at the Zoetic Theatre, 526 Concession St.

"In the first year everything was concentrated in one little area," Hopkins says. "Gradually, there was a moving outward and people just followed the crowd."

This year there are more shows coming from outside the area. "That's because Hamilton is on the map. It's now known as a centre for music, art and indie theatre," Hopkins suggests.

With Theatre Aquarius, our regional presenter of professional productions, community theatre groups like the 143-year-old Players' Guild, and the burgeoning local indie scene, you might think we have enough theatre in town.

"Oh no," Hopkins says. "There's still room to grow. There's space for everyone. The new can stand comfortably beside the old. The Fringe is at the heart of much of what's happening in Hamilton."

"A Fringe offers artists and emerging artists the chance to experiment, to create new work. It allows them to be entrepreneurial, to produce their own shows in a fairly safe financial environment."

This means artists don't have to spend a fortune on publicity. There's already a framework for promotion and their work gets seen.

Risks can be taken, mistakes can be made and those can be built upon. The companies pay a \$25 applica-

tion fee. If accepted they pay \$350 to \$650 to present their show. They keep all box office revenue.

"The Fringe makes its money from the sale of one-time \$5 buttons," Hopkins says. "We also get grants from The Ontario Arts Council, City of Hamilton, Ontario Culture and Activities Club and sponsors who dip into their own pockets."

You might wonder with so many shows if they're all terrific.

"The productions are not vetted; not viewed ahead of time for quality control," Hopkins says. "The shows are chosen at random. That's the very concept of a Fringe. So standards vary."

Then there's the question of censorship. What are groups permitted to put on the stage? Just about anything, it seems.

"We don't tell people what they can do and say on the stage. This has to be a place where artists are free to present work without restrictions."

FRINGE continues // G4

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY HAMILTON FRINGE

# A&E

FRINGE continued from // G1

A GENERAL HINT for audiences is to listen to the buzz around the venues, listen to word of mouth, ask questions, examine the topic and then choose wisely. This also goes for knowing which shows will be this year's Fringe hits.

An important offshoot of Fringe Festivals is the fact the shows attract a young audience.

It's no secret most cultural events attract a mostly grey-haired crowd. Young people need to be encouraged to come to the theatre if it's going to survive.

"They don't go because they feel threatened by the big theatre experience. They don't feel they belong there. And they can't afford the ticket prices at places like Stratford, Shaw and Mirvish, even though those theatres try to offer deals when they can. Another crucial thing is, when young people go to the big spaces they don't see images of themselves on stage. And that's a big turnoff," Hopkins

says.

Prices for Fringe shows range from \$8 to \$12 and some offer \$5 tickets for young people. Of course you have to purchase the one-time \$5 Backers Button that allows you to buy tickets. Through schools and other agencies the Fringe also offers a number of free tickets for those young people who meet the criteria. Best way to check prices is to go to the Fringe site.

Hopkins has hopes for the future of Fringe in Hamilton.

"I hope to see more companies coming from outside to perform here. I hope to see more add-on events. I hope to see Fringe partnered with other agencies and events. Hopefully we'll keep growing. In 2003, our second year we had a crowd of 2,400. Last year in 2017 we had 11,000. That's progress."

With 53 shows to choose from it's difficult to select the ones that sound unmissable. Based on a wide range of shows here's a small sampling of things that sound seductive. Go to [hamiltonfringe.ca](http://hamiltonfringe.ca) for more details.



LOVE, LOSS, AND WHAT I WORE.



THE YEAR AND TWO OF US BACK HERE



HEATWAVE



B!TCH ISLAND



UNDER THE APPLE TREE

It's no secret most cultural events attract a mostly grey-haired crowd. Young people need to be encouraged to come to the theatre if it's going to survive.

## Para Dos

This dance show from Argentina is performed by Montreal's Pointe Tango Dance Company. Think of the music of the barrios of Buenos Aires. Think of fluttering skirts and the sleek sexy look of rapier thin males stamping their heels in time to the passionate rhythms of the dance of love. Hamilton Players Guild, 80 Queen St. S.

## A Shoddy Magician in a Parking Lot

He calls himself comedy's worst magician. He performs his show in the driveway of The Staircase Theatre's parking lot. He's considered an amalgam of Charlie Chaplin, David Copperfield, and Criss Angel. His show is labelled Parental Guidance. Parking lot at The Staircase, Dundurn near Main.

## B!tch Island - The Musical

This one comes with a real pedigree. You've probably seen Bruce Dow perform at Stratford and Shaw. But you haven't seen his musical comedy about women in prison played by young men. Expect the sass of Rocky Horror in this gasp, gasp pistol hot comedy. Expect strong language (swearing) mature content (dirty talk) and nudity (How much? Who knows?) I just wouldn't bring the kids if I were you. Zoetic Theatre, 526 Concession St.

## Love, Loss and What I Wore

The Women's Company of Regina Saskatchewan brings Nora and Delia Ephron's comedy about the clothes women wear and how they influence their lives. Buying bras, choosing prom dresses, hating their purses and relating with each other; it's all here. Based on a book by Ilene Beckerman. Mills Hardware, 95 King St. E.

## Under the Apple Tree

Theatre Erebus Hamilton presents murder in Hamilton's old Lyric Theatre. This Vaudeville musical evokes real-life crime and a whiff of vintage nostalgia. Shysters, show-girls and lost innocence all rolled into one giant Crimestopper's package. Zoetic Theatre, 526 Concession St.

## The Year and Two of Us Back Here

Hamilton's Broken Soil Theatre offers Michael Kras's new play. Rain and Isaac try to sell overpriced headwear in a crummy hat shop in downtown Hamilton. The story is about longing, loss and losing. A funny and emotional work from a familiar Hamilton brand. Staircase Café Theatre, Main Space, Dundurn near Main St. W.

## How I Became Canadian

Toronto playwright Iris Gardet-Hadengue brings her one-person show about a woman from Paris, France, who celebrates the joys of moving to Canada. She says her show "is a celebration of everything Canadian, from a Parisian woman's point of view." Theatre Aquarius Studio, 190 King William St.

## Heatwave

Hamilton's Fishbowl Theatre Collective presents a scorching summer night, as a lesbian couple, Danny and Mia, head for crisis. A play about labels and how they can give you a place, but also how they box you in. Theatre Aquarius Studio, 190 King William St.

*Gary Smith has written on theatre and dance for The Hamilton Spectator for more than 35 years. Special to The Hamilton Spectator*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY HAMILTON FRINGE



Cast members of David B. Fraser's "Mary, I Have His Pants!"

KEVIN THOM PHOTO

## Playwright David B. Fraser has done it all

Standup, improv, murder mystery evenings, dinner theatre, community theatre. Oh, and ... he writes plays



JESSICA DARMANN, HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTO

David B. Fraser, 53, has a wealth of stage experience.



GARY SMITH

David B. Fraser always felt invincible on stage.

"I would have aches and pains and worries but they would all disappear when I was on stage in a play," he says.

"Then, in 2006, when I was in The Players' Guild production of 'How Could You, Mrs. Dick?' I had an anxiety attack. Curiously enough it was brought on by eating bad food. I couldn't continue and I had to walk off the stage just before intermission. The play was finished but not by me. I wasn't sure I could ever be in a play again."

Playwright Fraser has always seemed an easygoing man. That stage experience and the later breakup of his marriage caused

nervous breakdowns that sent him for psychiatric help.

Calmer now, Fraser admits he still finds it difficult to sit through a play, including one of his own.

"I worry for the actors. That's just how it is."

Fraser, 53, has a wealth of stage experience.

He did standup comedy, improvisation, murder mystery evenings, dinner theatre shows and community theatre productions. He also writes his own plays.

"The experiences I had on stage contributed to my being able to write my own material. I began when I was just a kid writing little stories at school. Later the plays just came out of me. For a while I was writing a play a year. I am, in fact, the most produced playwright at The Hamilton Fringe.

"I've had seven productions done there. The Fringe is a great thing for playwrights who want to see their work produced. A play isn't really a play until it's performed somewhere," Fraser says.

"You've got to be able to see what works and what doesn't. For that you need a production and an audience."

"Mary, I Have His Pants!" is actually my oldest play," Fraser says.

"It kept getting workshopped by theatres, but they always ended up more interested in my darker drama 'Emma Porter.'

"I wrote 'Mary' when I was on holiday in a cabin on Red Lake. It's my oldest play. Now, I'm not really a log cabin type person. My wife said, 'Why don't you sit down and write a play?' The idea of a play in a cabin setting, instead of a hotel room or apartment, intrigued me. About a year ago I found the play on an old VHS tape we had made of it. When I watched it I realized it was worth revisiting."

Fraser says the current version of "Mary," directed by Brian Morton, is a revised, shorter look at his old play.

"It's a screwball comedy. I've cut it so it will fit the Fringe's 60-minute time limit. I also think it's tighter now and works much better. In the play each character's moral stance gets murky. The hero isn't who you first think it might be."

Fraser says he's not one of those

### DAVID B. FRASER

**What:** "Mary, I Have His Pants!"  
**Where:** Hamilton Fringe Festival, Players' Guild of Hamilton, 80 Queen St. S.

**When:** July 15 at 10:30 p.m., July 16 at 2 p.m., July 18 at 6 p.m., July 19 at 9:30 p.m., July 21 at 6:30 p.m., July 23 at 9:30 p.m. and July 24 at 3 p.m.

**Tickets:** \$15 plus a one-time Fringe Button for \$5.

**Buy:** At the door or [www.hamiltonfringe.ca/tickets](http://www.hamiltonfringe.ca/tickets)

writers who feels he has to write every day.

"I do think work energizes me though. I mean, if you do nothing then a year from now you have nothing. Does that make sense? And writing helps with my anxieties. I love the dynamic you get from tension in a play, but I don't want any of it in my own life."

Fraser has no expectations of becoming a playwright who lives on royalties from his plays.

"I sort of realized I went as far as I was gonna go. I never wanted to move to Toronto and get involved with the bigger theatre scene. I always wanted to stay here in Hamilton and have a home and a family."

Fraser has two daughters, Lee and Sidney.

"I have to be here for them," he says. "It was my ex-wife who said 'Why don't you write a play?' Even though we're divorced she's a great lady. She's the mother of my children."

"Life is different today," he says. "Twenty years ago you could do a play in a storefront and not go broke. Everything's tightened up now. People ask for \$15 or \$20 an hour just for rehearsal space," he says.

"I never attend rehearsals of my plays.

"I leave the play in the hands of the director and the actors. I'm always confident they will just get it that's because I have to feel safe and only work with people that support me."

Gary Smith has written about theatre and dance for The Hamilton Spectator for more than 30 years.

CREATOR: HAMILTON'S INDEPENDENT VOICE

MUSIC NOTES  
• Robin Benedict  
• Kirk Stanley  
• Britney's Krack  
• Vincenzo Benenati

**VIEW**

COMPLETE ENTERTAINMENT LISTINGS FREE EVERY THURSDAY

**MARY, I HAVE HIS PANTS!**  
Chris Cracknell, Greg Cruikshank and Andrea Adcock

**Fringe Reviews**  
OUR REVIEWERS GET RIGHT DOWN TO BUSINESS

I never wanted to move to Toronto and get involved with the bigger theatre scene. I always wanted to stay here in Hamilton and have a home and a family.

DAVID B. FRASER



Cass Van Wyck, left, and Claudia Spadafora in #dirtygirl, a brutal look at the perils of social media.

DAVE PILIAN-NOMURA

VERITY CREATIVE

Megan English in "Send Music," a duo of solo dance pieces.

# Variety is the hallmark of Hamilton Fringe



GARY SMITH

A psychosexual encounter, an experiment with music and dance, a comedy set in a log cabin and a tough no-nonsense piece about the ugly side of social media: that's some of what you'll find at The Fringe. Here's a quick look:

## Christmas Eve at the Julibee Motel

"Christmas Eve at the Julibee Motel" is a taut, disturbing tale of confused passions and sexual desires that flirts with violence.

John Bandler's play, produced on the Fringe in 2007, has been given a snazzy remount that suggests an enigma.

Who are these two people circling each other in the lobby of a worn-out, sleazy motel? What is their relationship? Why do they always seem to be on the surface of some frightening discovery? And who will walk away the winner in their Christmas Eve games?

It's a time of peace and love for the Christian world, and these two lost souls are searching for some kind of salvation. Silent Night plays in the background.

Is this more than a chance encounter one rainy night as Mick and Cassie play their games? What is the history here?

Director Tom Mackan gives Bandler's piece a graceful ebb and flow, connecting the dots in a puzzle that purposely doesn't reveal itself completely.

James Thomas and Aimee Kessler Evans as the duelling duo give reasonable accounts of two people full of supercharged, heightened emotion.

There could be more tension and feral attraction here, something more vicious that propels this story of predators loose in life's jungle. See it at the Players' Guild of Hamilton, 80 Queen St. S., July 18 at 9:30 p.m., July 20 at 8 p.m., July 22 at 4:30 p.m. and July 23 at 6:30 p.m.

## Send Music

"Send Music" is a duo of solo dance pieces that explore the rela-

## THE HAMILTON FRINGE

**Where:** Various downtown locations  
**When:** Through July 24  
**Tickets:** \$10 plus, a one-time Fringe Backer's Button (\$5)  
**Buy:** At each venue just prior to the performance or [hamiltonfringe.ca/tickets](http://hamiltonfringe.ca/tickets)

ationship between music and dance. It asks this question: How is the creative relationship different if the dancer and musician aren't in the same room performing together?

The second piece explores beginnings. Megan English, the dancer/choreographer here, has put together the starting moments of about 35 songs. She dances them consecutively in an attempt to explore the contemporary attention span. The dances shift between improvisation and order. Music is performed by Dale Morningstar.

Performed at Factory Media Centre, 228 James St. N., July 22 at 7:30 p.m., July 23 at 2:30 and 8:30 p.m. and July 24 at 2:30 p.m.

## Mary, I've Got His Pants

Sharply written by David B. Fraser, beautifully directed by Brian Morton and acted by a quartet of first-rate actors, this is a dark yet funny play about love and marriage.

Chris Cracknell and Andrea Adcock are superb as a battling husband and wife and Gregory Cruikshank and Tyler Brent provide fine support.

Players' Guild of Hamilton, 80 Queen St. S., July 18 at 6 p.m., July 19 at 9:30 p.m., July 21 at 6:30 p.m., July 23 at 9:30 p.m. and July 24 at 3 p.m.

## #DirtyGirl

This play takes a brutal shot at the ugly way social media can invade lives. Why anyone would post naked pictures, or things they don't want seen and read by the viral world, is a bit of a mystery. We all know what you send out can go anywhere.

In Michael Kras's play, the dark side of the Internet is exposed and social media is held up to scrutiny. But there's more than that here.

Lost innocence, jealousy, false friendships and early sex tell us true innocence can be destroyed in a wicked heartbeat.

Kras's play is obviously a young



JOHN BANDLER

Aimee Kessler Evans and James Thomas warily circle each other in "Christmas Eve at the Julibee Motel."



ION EVANS

Chris Cracknell, left, Gregory Cruikshank, and Andrea Adcock in "Mary, I've Got His Pants!"

person's play. The issues, fears and traumas felt are exacerbated by the fact these are youthful characters struggling to find themselves.

Well written, with believable dialogue, it's also well-acted by Claudia Spadafora, Cass Van Wyck and Matthew Power.

Kras has taken pains to have his

play vetted by women because he thinks as a man he cannot feel what they do. He needn't have bothered. If this were true there'd be no Blanche Dubois, no Hedda Gabler, no Miss Julie and certainly no Eliza Doolittle.

#Dirty Girl is presented by Broken Soil Theatre at Staircase Café

Theatre, 27 Dundurn St. N., July 18 at 8:30 p.m., July 19 at 5:30 p.m., July 20 at 8:30 p.m., July 21 at 6:30 p.m., July 22 at 9:55 p.m., July 23 at 8:05 p.m. and July 24 at 3:45 p.m.

Gary Smith has written on theatre and dance for The Hamilton Spectator for more than 30 years.



SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

The cast of *The Whores*: Joanne Williams, left, Clare Blackwood, Jennifer Kenneally, Sarah Illiatovitch-Goldman and Hayley Fisher.

# Around The Fringe

## A sneak peek at four shows coming to Hamilton



GARY SMITH

It's time to Fringe. Don't know what that is? It's dashing from venue to venue to see the good, bad and ugly of theatre. A nonjuried event, *The Fringe* allows you to see what's on the cutting edge in theatre. For a small price you get to sample the-atre that's a little different than the usual Hamilton fare.

To get a jump on the 27 shows that will play Hamilton, I took the GO train to Toronto and caught four productions in that city's Fringe that are slated to play here. Here's a look at what I saw.

*The Whores* is a class act. Taken from interviews with Halifax-area sex workers, this is the real thing, a play that makes you feel uncomfortable yet relate to its characters.

Charles Crosby's script weaves together the lives of five women who "play for pay." Each approaches the business in different ways.

Lori (Hayley Fisher) enjoys sex with her Johns, at least she says she does. Sam (Clare Blackwood) is a druggie with nervous ticks, a million fears and a self-loathing sense of who she is and what

she's doing with her young life.

Cherry (Sarah Illiatovitch-Goldman) is the sexy student who works to pay tuition.

Carnie (Jennifer Kenneally) is the old broad who knows where life's at and has no illusions about who and what she is. Then there's Mary (Joanne Williams), the high-class call-girl who likes the fact rich men pay to have her as an escort.

These women tell stories that are riveting and scary. Violence is always just a trick away.

*The Whores* is powerful stuff. It could use better stage choreography and quicker pace from director Tanisha Taitt, but this is a Fringe play you won't soon forget.

Another Fringe offering worth seeing is Brian Morton's *New Talent*. It has played Hamilton Fringe before and comes back with a strong performance from Morton himself as a cool pimp.

Looking like a silver-haired Orson Welles, Morton (who also wrote the piece and directs this production) gives a terrific performance, cool and calculated all the way.

Gregory Cruikshank is touching as sad sex client Mike, longing to hold and love someone but too afraid. Add Anna Ross's frightened Christine, a lonely kid who has sold out to "the business" and you have a cast that connects well with Morton's play.

Set in Hamilton against the backdrop of the Plastimet fire of 1997, it's fascinating theatre.

The bedroom scene between Ross and Cruikshank needs work. And Christine's

**Need to know**

**What:** The Hamilton Fringe  
**When:** July 15 to 25  
**Where:** Theatre Aquarius and Downtown Arts Centre  
**Tickets:** More info and tickets go to [www.hamiltonfringe.ca](http://www.hamiltonfringe.ca)

rebirth at the end remains too calculated. Never mind, *New Talent* is well worth a look.

*Lambs In Winter* by Ray Rivers is a rag-tag play that tries to look at the way people sell out their youthful dreams.

There's a good performance from Karen Skidmore and so-so ones from Allan Price and Julian Nicholson (who also directs). Neither suggests sufficient anger or disappointment.

Rivers' play is soap-opera stuff. Too many ideas have just been force-fed into a play searching for its theme.

These three plays contain nudity and coarse language; be warned if such things upset you.

Doug McLaughlin's one-man show *Saucy Jack* has clever ideas about Jack the Ripper and contemporary acts of violence.

Too bad McLaughlin hasn't passion enough to put across his material. This one's for Ripper fans only.

*Gary Smith has written on theatre and dance for The Hamilton Spectator for more than 30 years.*

# Darkness that deserves to see the light



GARY SMITH

## Need to know

**What:** New Talent  
**Who:** Theatre Erebus  
**Where:** Toronto Fringe Festival, Theatre Passe Muraille, 16 Ryerson Ave. July 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11  
Hamilton Fringe Festival Downtown Arts Centre Studio July 16, 17, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25  
**Tickets:** At the door  
For more info: [hamiltonfringe.ca](http://hamiltonfringe.ca)

Brian Morton's *New Talent* is a gritty look at the underbelly of pay for play sex.

It's also a dark look at the way betrayal can touch our lives.

It's July 9, 1997 in Hamilton. A dark cone of smoke burns across a stormy sky. In a motel room at the Budget Motor Inn Christine is about to score with her first customer.

She's in her mid-20s and deserves more than life on a lonely Hamilton street corner.

Morton's play debuted at Hamilton's Fringe Festival in 2007. It was exciting, invigorating theatre. It deserved a later life, an existence beyond its few local performances.

Well, it's getting it. It's coming back to Hamilton's Fringe this year after runs in London and Toronto.

A few weeks ago playwright Brian Morton sat down and talked about his life and work. A rotund man with a handsome face Morton smiles easily.

"Everything worked well for me for years," he shrugs. "I was writing and producing plays. I premiered shows in London and Edinburgh. I was a real alternate theatre guy."

Morton did plays for Hamilton's Theatre Terra Nova in an old church on Dundurn Street. He seemed to be on his way.

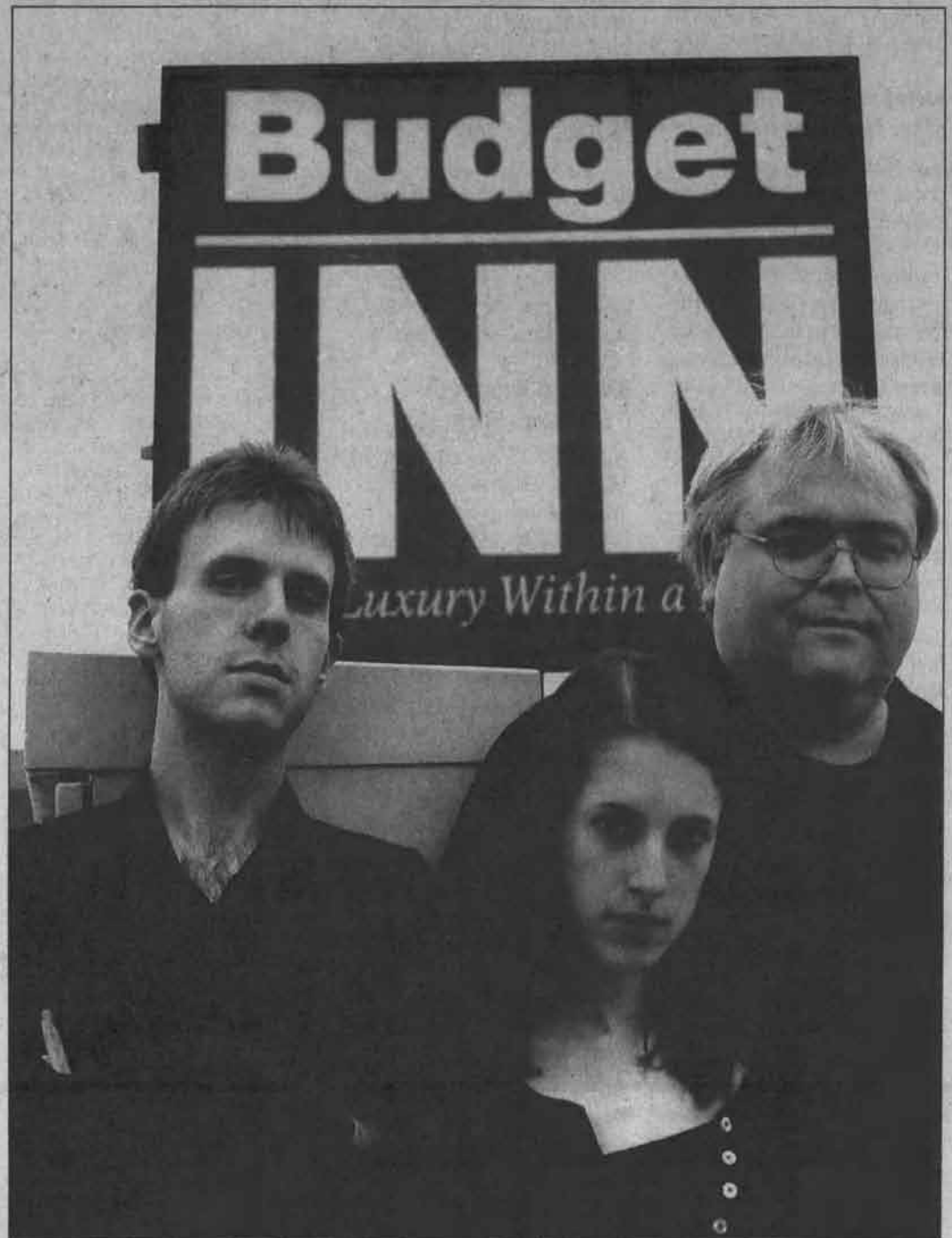
"Then I crashed and burned," he shrugs. "I hit the wall financially. I was dumped from Terra Nova. I'd never had a real job and I was on the street without too many options."

He was emotionally close to the edge and had amassed big debts.

"In 1993 I did a play, *Etta Jenks*, on Toronto's Tarragon Mainstage. It was ripped in reviews. People didn't come. It took years to pay off the money I lost."

Morton turned to drugs.

"I'm not proud of that," he winces. "I hit that scene heavily. It was awful. I hated what I was do-



SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Actors Gregory Cruikshank, left, Anna Ross and playwright Brian Morton are pictured above. Morton's work, *New Talent*, which debuted at Hamilton's Fringe Festival in 2007, will be playing at the Toronto and Hamilton fringe festivals this month. He says the new production of the play will be grittier.

ing. There was a dark side of myself that simply took over."

Morton found a support group. He went every Wednesday night. He learned to shuck off guilt and blame.

"The subculture is something I know quite intimately," he nods. "I understand where *New Talent* was born. I've paid for sex. I've known the characters in my play. Maybe that's why I care about them so much."

Morton supported himself driving a cab in Hamilton. He went back to school, to McMaster University, where he connected with a professor who made him care about theatre again. These days he's been on a second career program studying graphic design.

Morton feels his biggest success

as a playwright was his adaptation of Sylvia Fraser's novel *In My Father's House*.

"It was such a Hamilton play. And that's where my writing usually takes me."

"That's what made me write *New Talent* against the image of the Plastimet fire," he says.

"I was sitting with my girlfriend up on the Mountain brow watching this plume of smoke rising into the night. It became an important part of the play."

Morton says *New Talent* is about having secrets. It's about things you don't want people to know.

"People were exposed to so much toxins with that fire. It was quite scary. The characters in my play live with similar toxins that can also destroy their lives," he nods.

"This play is so personal, I know these people. It took time for me to realize, though, it's not about me. Knowing that has made the work stronger."

Morton says his new production of the play will be grittier.

"There's total nudity for one thing. That gives the play authenticity and power. The audience in a sense is a collective voyeur," he says. "My wish would be to take the play to Toronto for a run at someplace like Factory Theatre. I'm seasoned enough now to know that's only a dream. Still, you can't keep such fantasies away from me."

Gary Smith has written on theatre and dance for *The Hamilton Spectator* for more than 30 years.

# Sex is pretty good out on The Fringe



GARY SMITH

## Showtime

**What:** The Hamilton Fringe  
**When:** Through Aug. 24 (various showtimes)  
**Where:** Downtown Arts Centre, 28 Rebecca St.  
**Tickets:** \$9 per show or \$48 for a Fringe Binge pass (good for six shows) Plus a \$2 Fringe Button.  
**Information:** hamiltonfringe.ca

"The skill is playing men. Getting them off multiple times. It's all about coming."

Troubled little Christine, played with vulnerable warmth and absolute truth, is the "new talent" in Brian Morton's tough story of three sad lives, *New Talent*.

It's the sort of treasure you find now and then among hours and hours of Fringe dross.

When you discover such gems you want to scream from the house-tops.

This is theatre worth caring about. Thoroughly professional, from the acting and direction to the tough, excoriating script, it's

something apart from the other Fringe shows I caught.

Playwright-director Morton understands the stillness of drama. He knows how to tug us into a dark, lonely world. He knows how to take feelings torn from the heart and trample them on the bedroom floor.

Mike is a lonely John, desperate for company, a sad, fearful guy who needs healing love but settles for \$130 sex every few nights.

It's hard not to feel for him. Attractively played by Ian Rayburn, you know he deserves something more, but his psyche has been battered. He's unable to meet a girl except on a cash-and-carry basis.

Caroline Concordia's Christine decides to sell sex. She needs money more than self respect.

She's frighteningly real, too, a pawn in a world of loveless bedrooms and sad, hopeless men.

Together Rayburn and Concordia burn with desperate intensity that is both sweet and sadly troubling.

Morton captures the possibilities of their relationship brilliantly, then dumps us into the abyss. We realize these two can never be more than a business relationship.

As Gary, the all-business, no-nonsense pimp directing Christine's entry into pay-for-play relationships, Brad Young gives a chilling performance, all leering smiles and knowing control.

*New Talent* is evocatively lit, beautifully staged and cunningly set against the Hamilton Plastimet fire of 1997.

It's all about betrayal on a num-



SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Nea Reid and Michael Hannigan in Gerald Hilroy's *Guide to Seduction*.

ber of disturbing levels. I think the ending is fudged a little and too kind for the rest of the play.

But if you only have one Fringe play to see this year, Morton's is the one to watch.

Sex, and its ability to dominate our thinking, is also at the heart of David B. Fraser's insightful comedy, *Gerald Hilroy's Guide to Seduction*.

This *Seduction for Dummies* course benefits from excellent performances from Nea Reid and Michael Hannigan.

Reid, in an assortment of de-

lightful duds — not to mention provocative wigs — plays a series of sex-act participants, from rough-house dominatrix to sweet little mouse.

She changes dynamics swiftly and surely without missing a beat.

Hannigan has fewer costumes to play with, though he does strip down to form-fitting undies. He finds compassion and warmth in a comic take on an average male, looking for love — well, sex — in both right and wrong places.

Transitions are not made boldly enough and lighting is necessary to

relocate us from scenes of sexual foreplay to analysis after the fact.

Julian Nicholson directs decently, but could use a firmer grip on the comedy.

Summers' *Stock* pretends to offer a look at the man who created Hamilton's legendary Mountain playhouse. Unfortunately, after a short preamble it deteriorates into a half-hour homemade film of fuzzy photography and repetitive New Age music.

If you want to drool over endless views of Concession Street, present and past, this one's for you.

*You Are My Blood* is an earnest, if troubled, theatre piece that begins with poetic possibility and descends into trivial cliché.

Andrea and Teyanna Grant try hard to be engaging in this turgid look at a mother and daughter trapped in a cycle of pain.

Ultimately they're defeated by too many props, too many sound cues and too many blackouts. This play desperately needs a good director.

The less said about *The Super Sexy Cowboy Bachelor Extravaganza* the better. The title is the "play's" best thing.

Direction is appalling, performances shambling and the premise of kidding a TV reality show is just dumb.

How can you make fun of anything as atrocious as TV reality? It's already pathetic.

Gary Smith has written on theatre and dance for *The Hamilton Spectator* for more than 25 years.

## Fringe Festival: theatre with edge

### Need to know

**Who:** Jeremy Freiburger and Brian Morton  
**What:** The Fringe Festival  
**Where:** Theatre Aquarius Studio, 190 King William St.; Hamilton Theatre Inc. Studio, 140 MacNab St. N.; Pepper Jack Café, 38 King William St.; Bank of Montreal building, King and James streets  
**When:** July 16 to 26  
**Tickets and info:** hamiltonfringe.ca

BY GARY SMITH

"On the Fringe, a 55-year-old 400-pound actor can play Hamlet if he wants."

Brian Morton, Hamilton Fringe president, is talking about what makes a Fringe different from your average theatre experience.

"Expect edgy stuff. We're about being gritty."

Morton, who trained at Canada's National Theatre School, has run several professional theatre companies in the city, from Theatre Erebus to Theatre Terra Nova. He's a big Fringe booster.

Why?  
 "Because it's a chance to see fresh new things, to sample what theatre can be. And just think — you can do it without spending a week's wages."

Jeremy Freiburger, a graduate of the American Music and Dramatic Academy in New York City, is the festival's co-ordinator. He's bullish about the way this local celebration of theatre adds to our cultural climate.

"Hamilton has plenty of well-polished, professional theatre. The Fringe is something else. It's about people experimenting. The shows are never vetted so you never know what you'll see."

"It's all about risk-taking on the part of the companies involved, and on the part of the audience, too," Freiburger continues.

"You always hope you'll stumble on some great little gem, or see some actor destined for something big," Morton adds.

The first Hamilton Fringe in 2003 had 35 shows in five venues. "It was almost too big," Morton says. "Some shows played to less than 10 people. Others sold out their runs. It was a great experiment, but not enough people came out in support."

"This year we have 28 shows in four venues," Freiburger says. "We also have a patio at Pepper Jack Café where people can

congregate, have a drink and talk about the shows they've seen.

"There will be volunteers on bikes roving round the central Fringe area of King William and Hughson streets. They'll help people get to the venues."

"We want things to have a festival atmosphere," Morton says.

Freiburger adds: "There'll be everything from a circus-type show to standup comedy." With shows from Hamilton, and imports from New York, Vancouver and Portland, Ore., Fringe offers plenty of possibilities.

"It's micro-theatre," Morton says. "Some people literally travel with a suitcase putting on their shows out of a bag. If they have a chair, that's a set."

"It's all about artistic freedom. Since no one is censored, you never know what to expect."

"One show I'm looking forward to is by an ex-stripper. She's going to teach some lucky guy how to lap dance."

Freiburger and Morton know all about the struggle a theatre career represents.

Morton says he's trying to keep away from driving a taxi to make ends meet. At 43, he's realistic enough to know he's not going to make it big in theatre. "It's not that I haven't the ability. It's just..."

Freiburger, something of an entrepreneur, started the Imperial Cotton Centre for the Arts in Hamilton to help artists of all types make their dreams come true.

Freiburger thinks Hamilton is a Fringe city because "it has a lunch-bucket feel to it. Shakespeare and opera might not sell so well here, but a Fringe offers so much variety. It's real. The shows have grit to them, and you know we've always had an emerging arts community here since Day 1."

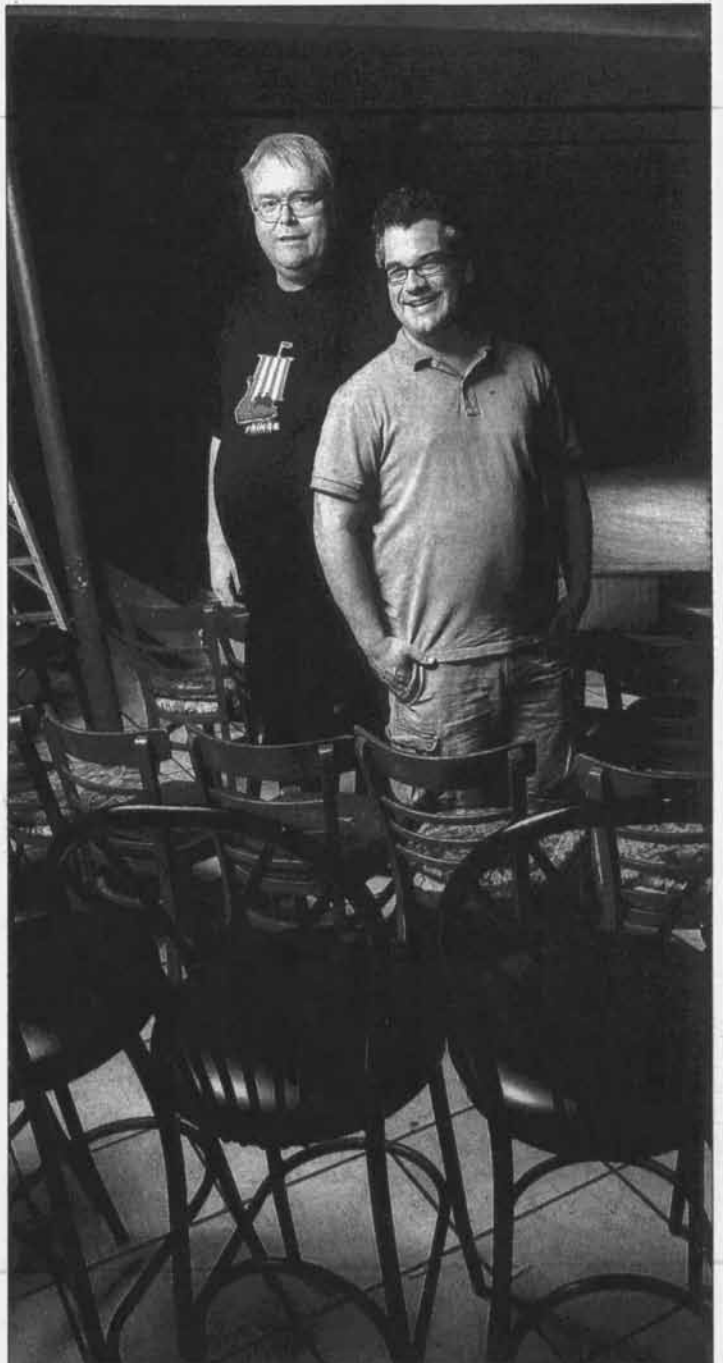
Morton, who saw his first Fringe in Edinburgh in 1984, admits it's about taking a chance.

"It can be the worst theatre you've ever seen or the best. You've got to listen to the buzz and find out what's hot and what's not. Most of all you've got to trust your own instincts."

With a \$60,000 budget, the Hamilton Fringe isn't small potatoes.

"We hope to keep growing and growing. Come out and see what we're all about," Freiburger challenges.

Gary Smith has written on theatre and dance for *The Hamilton Spectator* for more than 25 years.



RON ALBERTSON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Brian Morton and Jeremy Freiburger of Hamilton Fringe Festival. "We're about being gritty."

# Entering My Father's House

TORONTO

**Y**OU remember question from first act." "What question?" "Russians on Broadway?" "Russians on Broadway. Why not? Broadway is not just New York. Broadway is state of mind . . . like Russian vodka!"

Yes, this snippet of banter from the new *Russians on Broadway* show. That's right folks, the Russians are still here, the Russians are still here. On Thursday to Sunday of last week, the ongoing *Russians on Broadway* fiasco had one more convulsion at Massey Hall. Is this the last kick? Who would dare guess at this point?

In our story so far, 54 Russians arrived in Toronto last March to present a show called *Russians On Broadway* at the Musical Hall. The show closed after opening night, and stories of infighting, incompetence and bad debts have plagued the show constantly in the months since. Kind-hearted Torontonians have taken care of the stranded Russians, several of whom seem to prefer being stranded than heading back home.

Currently, the show's producer is Toronto developer Dan Barnabic (along with Luba Zorov, the costume designer and wife of Yuli Zorov, the writer, choreographer and director of the production). Only about a third of the original cast of 30 remain, although they are bolstered by "famous Russian television and movie stars along with gymnasts from the Olympic Unified Team."

Though it was not possible to distinguish between dancers, gymnasts and famous movie stars, it was easy to see the show was pretty dismal. This pseudo-glitzy dance revue that saluted various cultures came across as a kind of *Follies On Ice* without the skates. The ensemble dance performers were attractive, extraordinarily athletic, and highly skilled ballet dancers, and they were clearly slumming in sub-standard material.

Charles Northcote, a literary agent who came out of retirement as a director to help reshape the show, has compared Zorov's balletically-derived show dance style to the Broadway choreography of Jerome Robbins and Agnes de Mille, which is reasonably accurate. Unfortunately, the songs were inane, the sound system terrible and the communication with the audience almost non-exis-



Deborah Grover (left) and Leanna Brodie in *My Father's House* at the Dundas Centre for the Arts.

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

LIAM LACEY

tent. Some of the numbers were incredibly cheesy: in the Hospital sequence (a "fantasy" about Western hospitals) women dancers in white stockings and garters and little red crosses above their buttocks pranced about, while the male "patients" made google eyes and waved their crutches about.

The so-called stars of the evening included a man and woman, Igor Portnoi and Valery Yariomenko, who were responsible for that opening bit of banter. It gives me an idea for another way of revamping the show. Why don't they just call it *Russians on Vodka*, and put the whole thing on ice?

Stage adaptations of Canadian lit-

erature have been popular recently, with high-profile stage versions of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted On The Voyage* and Robertson Davies's *World of Wonders*, all presented in the past year and a half. In each case, I've found it difficult to get around the sense of presumption involved, that a famous writer's voice has been supplanted by a dramatist's all-too-literal pictures.

*My Father's House*, which is currently running at the The Dundas Centre For the Arts near Hamilton, is different. The book, about a woman's discovery, at the age of 47, that she had spent a lifetime blocking the memory that her father had had sex with her from the time she was 6 until she was well into high school, is not fiction. It's about novelist Sylvia Fraser's life, and the house of the title — in Hamilton in the forties and fifties — provided the impetus for director Brian Morton's adaptation.

This is a skillful adaptation, and could serve as a model. The outer frame of the work is, supposedly, a book reading: an actress playing Fra-

ser begins to read from her book in progress, but as she reads, the lights fade, and the drama begins. Three women (Deborah Grover, Kate Sykes, Leanna Brodie) and one man (Bruce Vavrina) make up the cast, and although some moments are ragged, the performances are well-balanced, open and committed.

Why does this work? Fraser's book came out in 1987, just at the beginning of a wave of information and theories about child abuse. As a novelist, rather than a psychologist, she re-created her experience using original perceptions and language. She came to see herself as two beings, the Child Who Knows, and the various other personas — high school princess or career woman — she invented to keep her secret from herself. The dream-like drama of self-integration makes for a surprisingly effective play. Unlike the usual trauma-of-the-week approach, *My Father's House* communicates a clear-eyed look at damage, without sentiment or rancor. You feel wiser for having seen it. And you don't feel that Fraser's book has been cheated or diminished.

**BETTY SHOULD RISE**  
Theatre Erabus  
Blow Up Abbotsford Lodge

THIS PLAY by the Canadian writer, David Demchuk, epitomises the reason for the Fringe never contracting into selectivity. The advertised theme of spinster Betty Staples living on welfare in an untidy Winnipeg flat, reliving her sad and savage girlhood until a lesbian love-match brought her temporary solace, quite honestly did not appeal to me.

What the blurb fails to relate is the powerful interplay of sisters conniving to suppress the abuse of the elder one by their father. And the conniving silence of their mother when it became obvious what was going on.

Tautly directed by Peter Bedard, first the failed Betty (Julie Gillitt), then the alcoholic but efficient Vera (Gambi Bowker) and finally the deranged but brutally honest Addie (Sylvia Schlayer) slowly, and sometimes with disturbing intimacy, exposed the tragedy of their respective childhood lives.

The elder destitute recalls early

22.50  
2.00  
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THE SCOTSMAN

Tues. Sept 28  
Thurs. Sept 30  
Sat. Sept 1  
5:00 p.m.

in this one-hour dramatic triumph the childhood horror of drowning unwanted kittens: "We held them underwater until their little hearts stopped." As acidic Vera takes up the narrative we are reminded that women were judged guilty of witchcraft if they rose to the top when pushed under water. Then in graphic detail Addie talks of a form of drowning without dying.

All involved in this production are to be applauded. I do hope their shifting programme will not prevent them getting the audiences they deserve.

Hayden Murphy

VENUE NO. 84  
BLOW UP AT  
ABBOTSFORD

**THEATRE REVIEWS** / U.S. playwright Marlane Meyer shows the underbelly of the Hollywood dream in a titillating but insightful work

# An articulate group of sleaze-balls

BY LIAM LACEY  
Theatre Critic

**A** YOUNG woman arrives at the bus depot in Los Angeles, a battered suitcase in her hand, dreams of film stardom in her head. Soon she's well on her way to a life of prostitution, pornography and double-crossing murder deals.

A play by Marlane Meyer about the nightmare side of the Hollywood dream, *Etta Jenks* is nasty work. The U.S. playwright's characters are an unusually articulate and self-aware group of sleaze-balls.

A Catholic hit man named Max (Jeffrey Peller), who finds Etta's line of work "distasteful," explains in detail the difference between a sociopath (him) — and a psychopath (his partner), Ben (Bruce Vavrina), a porn-film producer, is a kind of self-help philosopher: "In the long run, you'll resent me," he advises Etta, when she asks him if he'll do her a favour and make her an audition tape free.

The first act follows Etta as she learns the ropes. There are the taxi-dancing clubs where women rub up against men for a quarter a minute. There are the porn movie sets, where half-naked women compare infections and violent things they'd like to do to their male co-stars. Finally, there's Mexico, a kind of black hole into which women disappear, as stories of sex with animals and snuff films float back across the border.

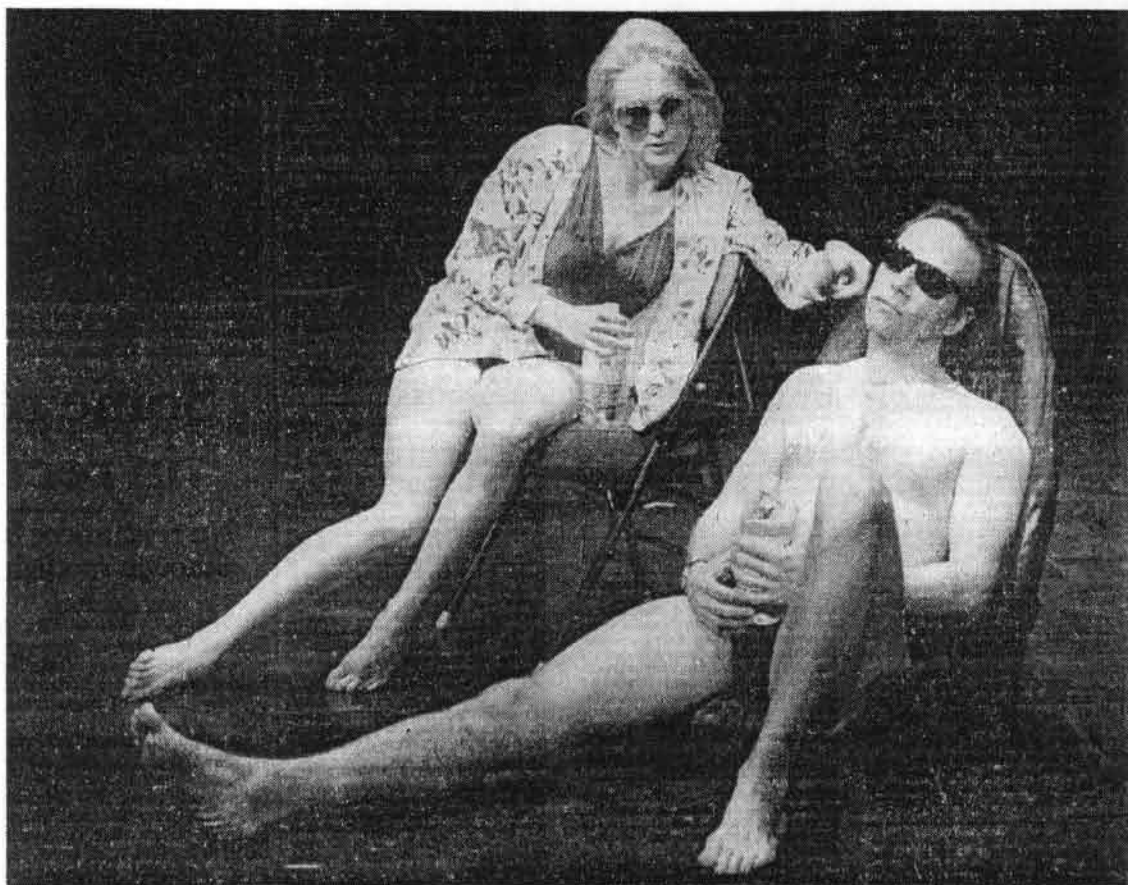
Etta, instead of tumbling down the predictable movie-of-the-week path of drugs, decline and death, takes a side-route: In the second act, she becomes involved in the porn business, trading in her tight top and jeans for a smart business suit.

Her changes are marked by a chain of memorable one-liners. There's the youthful: "My dad and my mom's dad were the same person." The boastfully jaded: "I can have sex with anything and look like I enjoy it." And eventually, the numb: "Except for the taste of dirt in my mouth, I could be dead."

Etta is a progressive set of attitudes rather than a character, but Leanna Brodie, who is on stage almost constantly, somehow manages to assume each of her masks convincingly.

The most memorable scene in the play takes place when Etta is deliberately out of the way. Two men, hired by her, take their time in preparing to kill a third in his hotel room; as the hit men banter back and forth, the suspense is almost unbearable.

The fresh-faced Canadian actresses in the cast (Deena Baltman, Kate Sykes, Gail Naipaul, Karen Ivany) are — despite their pouting lips, jutting hips and clinging blouses — not entirely convincing as jaded



Leanna Brodie and Bruce Vavrina in *Etta Jenks*: a side-route from the predictable movie-of-the-week path.

**ETTA JENKS**  
WRITTEN BY MARLANE MEYER  
Directed by Brian Morton  
Starring Leanna Brodie  
At the Studio Theatre,  
Hamilton Place,  
Hamilton  
Rating: ★★★

For all its graphic pulp-novel trappings and Hollywood plot momentum, *Etta Jenks* is a play about ideas, or at least one idea — the battle the spirit wages in the arena of the flesh.

And it has it both ways: It's a commercial vehicle that shocks and titillates, but at the same time it explores, with considerable insight, the crippling dualism that allows people to treat the spirit as a fiction and the body as a thing.

*Etta Jenks* continues until May 23.

sex merchants. They're more like teen-agers imitating a Madonna video.

But director Brian Morton has managed to make even this synthetic sleaze effective in context. Bridging the scenes are blackouts, the only lighting provided by flickering TV monitors about the stage, as the characters move in sinister tableaux. Christopher Robinson's throbbing and crashing musical track suggests the hellish undertow beneath the plastic surfaces of their lives.

## GRAND CHRISTENING

When director Brian Morton parted company with Theatre Terra Nova over artistic differences in 1989, it seemed as if he'd have to give up his dream of running a successful alternative theatre in this city. But after spending two years in England, Morton is back to introduce his reincarnation, Theatre Erebus, to Hamilton audiences. The fledgling theatre is named after one of the two doomed Franklin expedition ships which appear in Theatre Terra Nova's logo. "It's the direction Theatre Terra Nova would have taken," suggests Morton, explaining that it will be geared (like Terra Nova) towards developing Canadian playwrighting and mounting challenging and sometimes provocative productions. Terra Nova, meanwhile, is stuck as fast as the Erebus in financial difficulties, with no productions in sight. "I don't want Terra Nova to be dead," Morton asserts. "I don't sit and plot their demise."

The company is "testing the water" with *Etta Jenks*, opening this month, whose controversial subject matter (the play is set in the world of pornography and prostitution) is bound to raise some eyebrows. Come September, the company will launch a four-production season.

Theatre Erebus is making its home in Hamilton Place's Studio Theatre, the former home of Theatre Aquarius. Morton is thrilled about the space. "For the first time in my life, I'm not worried about finding old movie seats from abandoned theatres." ■

MORTON: KEEPING OUR ALTERNATIVE THEATRE AFLOAT.

