



The Balding

A hilarious race against time, nature, and the terrifying business of becoming a man.

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- 1) ***** (5 stars) “Gandell is an impeccable storyteller.” Calgary Herald (2014)
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- 3) “Gandell could well one day morph into Montreal’s answer to Spalding Gray.” Montreal Gazette (2013)
- 4) Interview with CBC’s All in a Weekend (2013):
<http://www.cbc.ca/allinaweekend/comedy/2013/06/09/gandell-and-harris-at-the-montreal-fringe-fest/>

The Balding, by Yarn Productions

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[Fringe Review: The Balding](#)

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Jeff Gandell

The Balding

Written & Performed by Jeff Gandell

calgaryfringe.com

Five stars

Jeff is a late bloomer.

He's the narrator of The Balding, Jeff Gandell's hilariously honest journey of self-discovery as a young man that coincides with his slowly going bald.

Gandell grew up in Montreal, wanting to be a writer, a la Jack Kerouac, who, in Gandell's mind, personifies a kind of swashbuckling, romantic literary man-of- action who is everything he – a 19 year old virgin – is not.

Following graduation from high school in the late 1990's, Gandell sets off on a gap year in London and Europe, determined to make both a literary and sexual breakthrough.

It's a wonderful setup for a coming-of-age story, and Gandell is an impeccable storyteller.

I don't want to say too much about the various mishaps Jeff encounters along the way, but let's just put it this way: the flip side of being a hopelessly romantic big picture aspiring literary lion living in Canada is that sometimes you don't take care of the little picture, like properly scraping frost off side windows, or attending to frozen pipes on cold winter nights.

Gandell's journey has as many Inspector Clouseau moments of awesome self-sabotage and casual wreckage as it does little victories, all of which he manages with a certain Montreal elan.

From time to time, Gandell bursts into song – think Regal Beagle karaoke in the wee hours – that might not be pitch perfect, but is actually fringe perfect.

Other than that, the Balding is nothing but Gandell, his stories and the thing that makes for the finest solo shows.

I once had a playwriting teacher, who went on to be a very successful TV producer, who said the only thing audiences respond to is the truth.

“They recognize it immediately,” he said, “and it's the only thing that makes them laugh.”

Gandell's stories resonate so well because they come accompanied with an unerring sense of his having lived through them, and the way he had Monday's Heritage Day audience laughing could be Exhibit A in any comedy writing workshop.

(I don't know if that counts as a Kerouac-sized literary triumph, but you gotta take your literary triumphs where you can get them these days.)

Excellentlly-directed by Matt Goldberg, and equally well-written and performed by Jeff Gandell, The Balding is must-see fringe theatre.

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Harried situations in Calgary Fringe Festival's 'The Balding' is the stuff of genius

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Calgary Fringe Festival: The Balding by Jeff Gandall (supplied image)

Back in 1999, Jeff Gandell was a 19-year-old Montrealer who had two goals.

He wanted to save his hair and lose his virginity.

To find out if he succeeded in either quest you have to see The Balding, Gandell's solo fringe show over at the Artpoint Gallery until Aug. 9.

When I say you have to see The Balding, I mean it sincerely because it is 50 minutes of hilarious truth telling you simply don't want to miss.

Solo shows are a dime a dozen, especially at fringe events, and the most entertaining and memorable ones are always those where you realize that no one could possibly make up such bizarre events.

It would be cruel to Gandell and to prospective audiences to give away too many of the catastrophes that befell him before he reached his 25th birthday.

Suffice it to say your heart will go out to this poor sad sack who just can't seem to make it in the sack and who just can't understand why he is the only male in his family with a receding hair line.

Great as it is to have car accidents, exploding water pipes, girls who leave hearts on your school locker, clumps of hair in the shower drain and travels to Britain and Europe in your history, they mean nothing unless you can communicate the angst and longing they created for you.

This is the real genius in Gandell's The Balding.

As a struggling teenager, he dreamed of becoming a writer like his hero Jack Kerouac and Gandell did without having to ape Kerouac's style.

He knows how to build a joke to a dynamite punch line and he knows how to repeat phrases for maximum effect.

I'd love to read The Balding in print because it is so witty and clever but I'm certain it wouldn't be nearly as effective without Gandell's delivery.

The guy is also a consummate actor who knows which facial expressions and which gestures to use to enhance his storytelling.

He even wrote and sings two hysterical songs which he delivers with a kind of youthful glee.

When you see Gandell or his photos you pretty much know he lost that battle with his hair line but the real surprises are all to do with that question of sexual potency and I'm not letting that cat out of the bag.

** ** *

After spending such quality time with Gandell I was a bit leery as I headed over to Festival Hall for yet another solo show, this time with Rory Ledbetter and his musings on gambling addiction in A Mind Full of Dopamine.

I was prepared for one of those heavy, soulful confessions and was convinced that's what I'd get when the first words out of his mouth were that he had a confession to make.

Ledbetter really does expose his heart and soul in A Mind Full of Dopamine but he's such a gifted storyteller that he eases you into the trauma gambling created in his life.

His three props are a harmonica, his cap and a chair and he use each for maximum effect.

There are plenty of honest laughs in the first half of his confession because he peppers it with some very funny pop culture references.

It was his best friend's father who taught the two 13-year-olds how to play poker.

The dad played a rather mean trick on young Ledbetter when he suckered him into betting all his money on what seemed like a great hand but wasn't and then promptly said it was only a practice hand.

That image comes back to haunt Ledbetter later in life when he is on a losing streak and wishes it was all a dream or a practice hand.

Once Ledbetter reaches Los Angeles and begins working in a coffee shop to fuel his gambling habit he recalls some of the regulars he got to know on the circuit.

He makes us see these people and their idiosyncrasies and that is part of his genius.

After allowing his audience to relax with the lighter moments that lead to his hard core addiction, Ledbetter shows exactly what it is like to be risking everything you have in the belief lady luck will rescue you at the last minute.

When he takes his audience into the high stakes game that was his downfall, we're with him every excruciating, humiliating minute and we desperately want to scream out to him not to continue.

At the show I attended, people actually did utter exclamations of disbelief and warning and disappointment which shows just how deeply he'd made us care.

That honest human connection is what makes A Mind Full of Dopamine so effective, so moving and so unforgettable.

More kudos to Ledbetter to know when and how to end his monologue.

Too many solo shows seem to meander past the climax but not Dopamine.

** ** *

The bald-faced truth from Jeff Gandell

Performer brushes aside trauma with humour in one-man show

BY BILL BROWNSTEIN, THE GAZETTE JUNE 20, 2013



Jeff Gandell used to think his hair was his best feature — until he started losing it: “Now my head is becoming my face.”

Photograph by: John Kenney, Montreal Gazette

MONTREAL - The adventure for Jeff Gandell began 17 years ago when he was 19. He went to London to pursue two goals: become a writer and lose his virginity. He felt the prerequisite to becoming a successful writer was to become a successful ladies' man.

Gandell failed on both counts, although he did hook up with a fellow who sought his help in constructing a UFO.

Then, upon his return to Montreal, he had the brainwave to grow dreadlocks, for he believed that a massive head of hair would be the key to his becoming a successful ladies' man and, by extension, a successful writer. He had long held to the notion that his hair had been his greatest feature. Furthermore, the writers that he admired all had fabulous heads of hair.

But then tragedy struck. Clumps of hair began falling from his scalp. Horror of horrors: he was

becoming bald. Then the race began: to lose his virginity before he lost all his hair.

Such is the dilemma Gandell painfully recounts in his brutally honest yet comical confessional, *The Balding*, his one-man show being presented at the Fringe fest.

“Now my head is becoming my face,” he blurts on stage.

And, as if life weren’t complicated enough back then, he was having issues with his parents. They didn’t take kindly to his allowing the family dog to sleep in their bedroom — after it had been sprayed by a skunk. Nor were they amused that he totalled the family vehicle and followed that up by totalling the loaner vehicle they were given.

All, of course, was somehow related to his premature balding and his vain attempts to woo a woman. He equated his hair loss to losing a link with reality.

“The stench of failure was worse than that of the skunk,” Gandell informs audience members, who are, perhaps, sympathetic to his plight, but who are definitely more amused.

He tried covering up the bare spots on his scalp with whatever remnants he had left. But he was getting no help at all from the elements: “The wind has no respect for the balding.”

He was now 22 and he feared he would die a virgin.

We will resist from spilling the goods on what transpires in Gandell’s quest, but, suffice it to say, his odyssey continued to be blocked by obstacles.

But what is certain is that Gandell now has both the necessary writing and performing skills, which will probably prove useful for career as well as mating purposes. His deadpan delivery trumps his baldness. However, his crooning — he does a couple of tunes in the show — is not his strong suit; in fairness, he sings more for laughs than to impress with his vocal range.

Though *The Balding* is Gandell’s first Fringe play, he has been paying dues as a raconteur and improviser around town. His comic monologues have touched a chord with local audiences. He was the winner of the 2013 Wired on Words contest, sponsored by CKUT radio. He is also the host of Yarn, a monthly evening of comedic tale-spinning in town. Gandell could well one day morph into Montreal’s answer to late/great New York storyteller/actor/writer Spalding Gray. But until that day, he is practical enough to realize that he requires a day job to pay the rent and to romance the ladies. That day job entails teaching English at Dawson College.

Gandell insists he has long come to terms with his depilated pate. “From when I was 19 to 27, it was just an extremely painful process. There was no way I could have talked about this, other than to close friends,” says Gandell, following his Fringe performance. “It’s like losing part of your anatomy.

“Then I shaved my head and kept it shaved when I was 27. I thought to myself: ‘Oh, it looks good. This doesn’t matter anymore.’ Going bald was really terrible. Being bald is not really so bad. But I figured

that I went through this terrible process, so I might as well get something out of it.”

And so he has. Gandell hopes that not only those facing baldness will get something out of the piece.

“The play is really about vulnerability, trying to feel worthwhile and trying to feel valued. I think a lot of people can relate to that. I also think that being able to talk about how you’re not comfortable with yourself is actually a sign of being more comfortable with yourself.”

Gandell, who has a master’s degree in English literature from Université de Montréal, is also comfortable balancing teaching and performing. “I love teaching. It’s a kind of performance, too. I feel comfortable, as a result, performing in front of people.

“And the good thing about teaching CEGEP is that it allows me a lot of free time to do other projects. I also want to continue writing and, perhaps, to tour the Fringe festival circuit in Canada next summer.”

His next project takes on a fictional turn, about a misunderstood man who is wrongly perceived by others as being expressionless. “It’s been nice writing about myself, but maybe I’m just a little tired of it,” explains Gandell, currently unattached. “Honestly, there are just more possibilities with fiction.”

Hard to say, he has done well so far dissecting himself.

The Balding, Jeff Gandell’s one-man show, plays Friday, June 21 at 3:45 p.m. and Saturday, June 22 at 6:45 p.m. at Espace 4001, 4001 Berri St. Tickets: \$10; \$8 for students and seniors. Call 514-849-3378 or visit montrealfringe.ca.

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