

Entertainment / Stage

Toronto Fringe Festival: There's till time to take in dance

Fringe offerings include hilarious [2 for Tea](#), convincing [MSM \[men seeking men\]](#) and the clever [O\(h\)](#)



SHELBY DUNCAN PHOTO

Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith in [O\(h\)](#), on at the Toronto Fringe Festival.

By: [Michael Crabb](#) Dance, Published on Fri Jul 12 2013

Fringe frenzy will be at fever pitch this weekend as fans of Toronto's summertime theatre festival, this year celebrating its 25th anniversary, scramble to catch a few more shows before the 12-day event winds up Sunday evening.

Fueled by word of mouth, social media and Wednesday night's announcement of this year's Patrons' Pick Awards, remaining tickets for the most popular performances will be hot properties. Yet, with more than 100 productions in a multiplicity of genres happening at a dozen different venues, there's still lots to choose from. Fringe festivals by definition are supposed to run counter to the mainstream, to offer wackiness, whimsy and a healthy dose of provocation. They provide a launch pad for emerging talent, performance opportunities for artists who otherwise struggle to find a public platform and have spawned a genus of performer who more or less survives by touring to fringe festivals around the world.

In terms of polish and professionalism the offerings predictably cover the gamut, but the range in terms of performance type has also broadened from theatre of the spoken word, often spiced with mime and clowning, to embrace more contemporary trends in physical theatre and dance.

On the surface, for example, Patrons' Pick Award winner [2 for Tea](#) might seem classic Fringe fare — broadly clown-based, surreal-absurdist comedy — yet a good deal of this thoroughly engaging show's appeal, complete with hilarious audience participation, derives from Vancouver-based Alastair Knowles' pitch-perfect ability to express his character's bittersweet search for human connection through movement, as much and perhaps more so than through words.

Ideally, this could also have been the achievement of [MSM \[men seeking men\]](#), a large-cast production that by its own description is "a movement deconstruction of online male personas and desires towards other men." Ironically, however, for all the parading around to DJ Scooter's unrelenting beat and the depictions of physical

connection — rough, tender and in between — it's the words, inspired by actual online MSM chat, that convey the show's not-so-subtle message that cyber hookups are an emotional cul-de-sac. In this spoken regard, Nico Racicot and Aldrin Bundoc deliver performances of particularly convincing intensity.

For a show with dance or at least the aspiration to become a dancer as its plot trigger, Hamilton-based Fulcrum Theatre's [Here](#) turns out to be a disappointingly overwritten and unnecessarily convoluted play on that time-honoured theme of letting go and moving on. Jacqueline Byers' Emily has to confront the potential shattering of her dancing dream — scarcely aided in the process by roomie/best-friend-from-Hell Heather (Jessica Cox) — while goofy, lovable loser Ken must accept that his obsession with Heather is shakily founded, like much else in his life, on fantasy.

For full throttle dancing, the kind that will make you want to get up and join in, you couldn't do better than Toronto's Mix Mix Dance Collective's [Jack Your Body](#). An incandescently wonderful eight-member cast takes us on a waacking, voguing historical journey into the house of African American underground dance culture complete with outrageous costumes and over-the-top ballroom antics.

And talking of historical journeys, Edmonton's Good Women Dance Society probably didn't intend to take us back in time, but the two works on its program [Fracture](#) could have stepped right out of the 1970s. The first and longer piece, the quasi-expressionistic *Pod*, features choreographer Alida Nyquist-Schultz and Ainsley Hillyard as two creatures struggling to emerge from the oversized cocoon of a huge plastic sheet. Needless to say, one of them at least is not sure emerging is all its cracked up to be.

The shorter work, Alison Kause's *Shatterstate*, reeks in its kinetic rigour of 1960s New York post-modernism, except in this case it comes with a lengthy program note about the dance's conceptual inspiration, an explanation that is only partly fulfilled by the choreography.

And if you do decide to see *Fracture* you'd be well advised to delay seeing Californians Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith's totally brilliant [O\(h\)](#) until afterwards or else you might get the giggles sooner than intended. Casebolt and Smith, both accomplished artists and university dance professors, essentially skewer the pretensions and idiocies of the worst of modern/contemporary dance through a combination of movement and razor-sharp banter.

For those who've suffered at the receiving end of Casebolt and Smith's target subject, it's like a breath of fresh air and also side-achingly funny. But it's the clever way the pair integrate themes of gender identity/stereotyping and pose questions about artistic appropriation and the very nature of "contemporary" that add texture to *O(h)* and leave lots of food for thought. It's a dance fan's must-see.

The Toronto Fringe Festival is on until July 14. See www.fringetoronto.com for full schedule, venue information and ticketing, or book via 416-966-1062.

More on thestar.com