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Biting the Big Apple

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arts@sfbg.com **THEATER** The world's largest arts festival, the now-venerable Edinburgh Festival Fringe, got its start in 1946 as a scrappy party-crasher outside the official Edinburgh International Festival. Thanks to its inspired blend of difficult-to-categorize, anything-goes performances, the Edinburgh Fringe helped create a definitive theatrical format that has since flourished in Fringe Festivals around the world. Among other things, Fringe is a catalyst for new works, new companies, and new interpretations of how theater can be made, and experienced.

Of all the Fringe Festivals in the United States, the one that generates the most buzz is by far the New York International Fringe Festival (this year's dates are Aug. 12-28). That the New York Fringe is curated is a sticking point among festival purists because it violates one of the founding precepts of Fringe: that anyone with a story to tell and a willing venue can take part. Despite that breach, there still manages to be a pretty broad spectrum of representation.

Works originating in the Bay Area display a staggering variety: the tale of an Iranian-American woman striking a compromise with her Islamic family over her live-in atheist boyfriend; a provocative series of multigenerational monologues on body image and acceptance; a musical homage to a 19th century black opera pioneer; and a transcontinental coming-of-age story.

When Bay Area comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh began developing her solo show *All Atheists Are Muslim* at the Bay Area's Solo Performance Workshop in 2008, she discovered something about the material that she had previously worried about being alienating or inaccessible.

"The Muslim and non-Muslim public is [hungry] for a three-dimensional view of a mainstream Islamic-Iranian American family that isn't some heavy-handed political discourse," she shares over e-mail. "I love seeing that moment when the audience that came in with their arms crossed, ready to challenge me and my 'ludicrous' title, realize that by my father's very mathematical equation, all atheists are in fact Muslim."

For Noorbakhsh, the fest offers not only the opportunity of performing in New York but of expanding on the very definition of Fringe.

"It gives a 'fringe' culture and religion like Islam a platform and an opportunity to open up a dialogue with the non-Islamic world," she says. "[And it] has given me an opportunity to be a part of the healing that needs to happen between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans and the general image of Islam in the public consciousness today."

Oakland native 'rie Shontel (a.k.a. Anita Woodley) raises consciousness every week as a producer for syndicated North Carolina Public Radio show *The Story* in Chapel Hill. But it wasn't until 2009 that Shontel was moved to tell her own story, initially to friends and family, and *Mama Juggs* was born. Inspired by the memory of her 100-year-old great-grandmother, Suga Babe, and her repertoire of breast-feeding songs, Shontel performs four interwoven monologues wrestling with body image and breast awareness (her mother, one of the characters portrayed, died of breast cancer at 47), and the cultural myopia surrounding both. What sounds on the page like potentially heavy-handed material reveals itself on the stage as a thoroughly engaging, irreverent take on "titty juggs," her great-grandmother's term.

August may mark *Mama Juggs*' first foray into Fringe, but Shontel has already been drumming up national support via her "100 Living Rooms" tour, performing in private homes across the U.S.

"The intimate parlor performances have raised many interesting discussions and encouraged many to get breast exams," she reports. "My mission for *Mama Juggs* is to make breast health a topic for conversation."

"I was inspired by this very accomplished woman of color and wanted to give voice to her story that has been largely forgotten." Opening up an entirely different conversation, Oakland-based opera singer Angela Dean-Baham's solo show *The Unsung Diva* traces the history of 19th-century black opera sensation Sissieretta Jones. In a format reminiscent of Tayo Aluko's tribute production *Call Mr. Robeson*, Dean-Baham's one-woman work of musical theater combines

American folk and spirituals with operatic arias and character vignettes drawn from the life of a woman once so influential that she was the first African American to perform at the then-unnamed Carnegie Hall. Like her hero, Dean-Baham is excited about what a successful run in New York could mean for her future.

“NY Fringe offers its artists a tremendous opportunity to put work before NY agents, producers, press, diverse audiences at a reasonable cost to self-producing artists,” she said. “As a juried theater festival, they offer the immediate gratification that other artists find the work engaging and that there is an audience for the work.”

San Francisco-born Aileen Clark knows firsthand the universality of a good story. Raised speaking three languages on four continents, Clark nevertheless refers to herself as the “whitest Latinita” on the planet, and her solo show *How I learned to Stop Worrying and Lost My Virginity* has touched a nerve among audiences of all colors and persuasions.

“I’ve always loved telling stories and acting out everything I see and do,” she says, describing the impetus behind the show’s creation. “I set out to make a play that would feel like we were just hanging out at a party and talking.” With John Caldon of Guerrilla Rep and Claire Rice of AMP, she crafted a comedic coming-of-age memoir packed with 21 characters, which debuted at the EXIT Theatre in November 2009. Newly transplanted to Brooklyn, Clark hopes *Virginity* will help introduce her to New York audiences.

“This show definitely gives me a wonderful connection with the people who come to see it,” she enthuses. “I’m hoping Fringe can be a door that opens other doors to great opportunities.”

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