

The Fringe Element

by Nicole Gluckstern

My first evening in Montreal I go to the Grande Marche Jean-Talon where the dumpster diving is said to be some of the best. My friend Kristoff, who has brought me here, is less than satisfied by what's available tonight, though — mountains of soggy-bottomed citrus and pock-marked zucchinis — until I chance upon a pile of cardboard boxes filled with discarded tomato seedlings and damp cubes of potting soil. As the threat of rain begins tapping us insistently on the shoulders, we fill two produce crates with the delicate sproutlings and great handfuls of dirt, piling them onto our weather-worn bike cart. As always, Kristoff shakes his head in wonder at what people will discard rather than make an effort to save, and as always his appearance at the co-op, bearing armfuls of reclaimed resources, elicits a chorus of amazement from his housemates as to his scavenging abilities.

"Kristoff is a dumpstering-ninja," declares an authoritative red-head with shaggy bangs sticking out from beneath her olive-drab cap. Dinnertime, we eat dumpstered brown bread with dumpstered honey, a casserole of dumpstered vegetables and bulk-bin grains, and tea made from fresh nettles gathered the night before under the blue moon. The food is plentiful and mostly palatable. The conversation is French and esoteric. The hippie vibe threatens

briefly to overwhelm, but fortunately Kristoff really is more of a ninja than a flower child, and he hustles me out the door to go clubbing before the strain of so much Ecotopian wholesomeness takes its toll.

After all, it's not vegan cuisine that has brought me to Montreal, but the 17th annual Montreal Fringe Festival which is about to begin. Fringes are typically unjuried performing arts and theatre festivals found in over 60 cities worldwide. From humble beginnings circa 1947, the Fringe Festival has morphed into a global phenomenon not to mention the single biggest arts festival in the world in its hometown Edinburgh, Scotland. Despite its almost outlandish popularity and staying power, Fringe is far from establishment entertainment. Fringe shows are generally too short (one hour or less) and too weird to play successfully anywhere else. Scrappy, edgy, low-brow and high-spirited, Fringe performers are the theatrical equivalent to garage bands. And as theatre technicians are the punk rockers of the theatre world — surly, DIY savvy, black-clad — I, as a Fringe technician, must surely be punk as fuck. A long-time veteran of the San Francisco Fringe plus a stint in Edinburgh, I've come to Montreal, because honestly, why should performers have all the fun of touring?

Now, I've been a few places (33 countries and counting), and fallen for any num-

ber of wistfully remote locales and bustling Metropoli. But I've never felt so instantly at ease as I do in the francophone Plateau of Montreal. Unlike other cities once colonized by the French — Dakar, say, or Vientiane — Montreal only boasts one beloved culinary achievement: a plate of soggy frites swimming in gravy and giant curds of unripened cheese. It only takes a single plate of *poutine* before I begin drawing assumptions about what I imagine to be the underlying plebian sensibilities characterizing the robust populace: sensibilities that dictate entertainment to be a humble case of bierre on the front stoop, iron railings to be open-season bike racks, and mayonnaise to be a God-given right.

Soon, I'm plugged into the greater Fringe community, many of whom are locals, or at least repeat offenders who know the ropes. Plus, I have my co-op roommates, Kristoff's circle, and a pocket guide to cheap restaurants, and rapidly my greatest challenge becomes trying to find time to fit everyone in. In between social whirls, I design lights for two one-man shows, and stage-manage one for its six-show run. These are *Hubris*, a method-actor's deconstruction of *Hamlet*, and *American Squatter*, a humorous power-point presentation about, well, squatting. Talk about punk rock.

The squatter, a fellow Coloradoan of sorts (me by birth, him by choice), is also touring his previous one-man show across Canada.

Anti-Courist

It's a post-squatting tale of his exploits as a member of a doomsday cult in Montana. No longer a squatter or a cultist, he has a perpetually beatific demeanor that could pass for just-plain folksy friendliness. I imagine that, as a cultist, he must have honed some of his affable mannerisms as recruiting tools. Regardless, he easily recruits me over to his camp with a round of beers and a plate of cauliflower curry, so who am I to speculate on the inner workings of human nature? He gives me a stack of postcards to hand out and reminds me of possibly the most important truth about human nature and self-promotion there is: "With these, you'll always have an excuse to talk to the most attractive person in the room." It's an excuse I have plenty of opportunities to exercise when the Festival finally opens and I go see some shows. Actually, many shows.

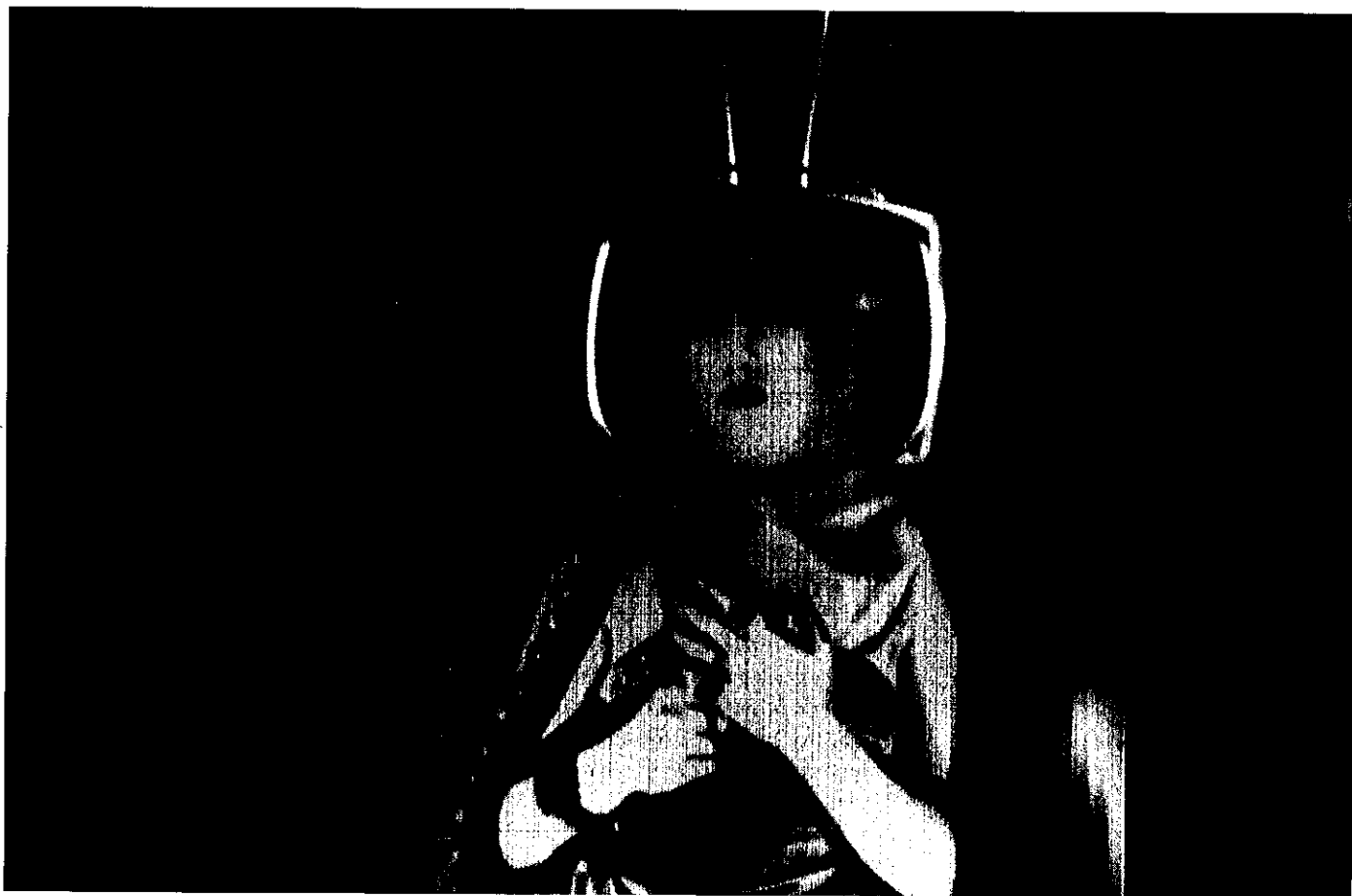
At the obligatory burlesque performance, I watch in some discomfiture as a blank-eyed young woman with an unfortunate surfeit of burn-scar tissue all down the right side of her body strokes herself with a lit torch to the strains of Peggy Lee's "Fever." At *Hanakengo* I am rendered speechless as two Japanese per-

formance artists in white greasepaint, puffball suits, and vinyl go-go jackets pull rubber tubes out of their ersatz fur vaginas and stick them in the ears of audience members while gleefully slurping on the other end. And then there's a hilarious concept concert which raises the ultimate question: "What if the White Stripes were German?" and answers with an album's worth of off-key songs sharing the same riff, inebriated onstage bickering, and a *neue Deutsche welle* segment that would make Peter Schilling proud. I watch the Fatties of Planet Gargantua battling Dietrons, Franz Kafka denouncing his dour father in a letter writ upon a sheaf of molting crow's feathers, an absurdist morality play about prison torture, and an impenetrable shadow puppet play about who knows. There's tragic clowning, performance poetry, hip-hop flamenco, noh theatre and theatre noir. Altogether I hit 24 shows in 10 days, but considering there are 100 shows at the Montreal Fringe, my tally seems paltry. Because I avoid all improv, my ratio of good shows to bad is just over 60/40 — which frankly, for a crap-shoot like Fringe, is damn near betting odds.

During the final weekend a mass wedding takes place. Fringers of all stripes pledge to see each other's shows, buy each other beers, and remain unlawfully wedded for the next 24 hours. Even in San Francisco I've never been afforded the opportunity to wed a Canadian raver, a German hippie, and an impressively large American dancing girl! at the same time, and as we exchange plastic rings and smash our plastic champagne glasses beneath our feet, I feel broadened by the experience. The former squatter stands on a table to take pictures of the chaotic dance floor as newlyweds in every possible combination strut their stuff. Earlier in the festival I'd mourned the fact that although Fringe itself was always a great deal of fun, the officially sanctioned parties never seemed to be quite as off the hook as one might have hoped. Three hours of frenzied marital bliss later he turns to me and grins,

"So, was this off the hook enough for you?"

It was. ✓



PHOTOGRAPH BY VERONICA EBERT