

DUMPSTER DIVERS AND AWARD-WINNERS: FRIGID ON THE FRINGE OF THE FRINGE

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FRIGID NY was the second Fringe Festival to emerge in New York City, following the successful FringeNYC. Unlike FringeNYC, FRIGID adheres to the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, which includes using a lottery system (rather than adjudication) and allows participating artists/companies to keep their box office. This paper presents an overview of FRIGID NY, contextualizing it within the history of the Off-Off Broadway and Indie Theatre movements, and provides a case study of a production at FRIGID NY, demonstrating that FRIGID NY is on the Fringe of the Fringe.

Keywords: Fringe Theatre, FRIGID NY, self-production, indie theatre, Off-Off Broadway

THE title of this paper is meant to grab your attention: on the *Fringe of the Fringe*? How can fringe be *more* fringe than fringe? In order to unpack what that means, we first have to understand that “fringe” is a word that defies a solid definition. In his paper, “Fringe Theatre Before the Fringe,” Colin Chambers writes:

Being on the fringe or on the edge can be geographically neutral or even negative, but it can also refer to being at the cutting edge of something, so usage varies. Is the fringe defined by something called the mainstream, and is it therefore its junior or subaltern, or does it offer an alternative that subverts the idea of what is at the centre and what is at the periphery?¹

1. Colin Chambers, “Fringe Theatre before the Fringe,” *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 31, no. 3 (2011): 338.

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For my purposes, I consider Fringe theatre as artistic endeavors that are driven by what David Crespy has called the “pioneer spirit” that has shaped our amateur (meaning, “lover of”) theatre movements since the early twentieth century, including both the Little Theatre Movement and the genesis of Off-Off Broadway.² To be on the Fringe of the Fringe, therefore, is to somehow take a step even further, into not only an uncharted territory but also a territory that was thought to have been already discovered, identified, and claimed. In some ways, this is the work of FRIGID NY, a *second* Fringe Festival that operates in lower Manhattan and is unaffiliated with the larger, internationally established FringeNYC.

FRIGID NY is driven by ideals that echo some of the manifestos of U.S. theatre companies collected by Todd London in *An Ideal Theatre: Foundations for a New American Arts*. One ideal in particular comes from Susan Glaspell’s thoughts on The Provincetown Players, which ushered in the Little Theatre Movement in the United States. Here London writes:

[Provincetown Players] began as a fervently amateur enterprise, and as such, forged a community whose spiritual bonds are elusive for professional companies. In [the] amateur theatre, we are connected adventurers together – audience, writer, player, all one.³

For my purposes today, I wish to discuss FRIGID NY as a site where amateur theatre artists welcome adventurous audiences, who together embrace the pioneer spirit. I will give a brief overview of the Off-Off Broadway theatre followed by a brief history of FRIGID NY. From there, I will use a personal case study to show how a handful of dumpster divers moved by the pioneer spirit mounted a show that was a minor cult hit at the 2015 FRIGID NY.

NYC Indie Theatre

The early Off-Off Broadway performance spaces of the 1950s and 1960s allowed for wild experimentation and transgressive political art, emerging as part of the larger counterculture Beat Generation literary movement.⁴ Caffè Cino is now recognized as the first gay theatre in the United States, though, as playwright

2. David Crespy, *Off-Off Broadway Explosion: How Provocative Playwrights of the 1960s Ignited a New American Theater* (New York: Back Stage Books, 2003), 12–13.

3. Todd London, “Tickets to a Revolution,” in *An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art*, edited with an introduction by Todd London (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), xv–xxiii.

4. See Deborah R. Geis, et al. *Beat Drama: Playwrights and Performances of the “Howl” Generation* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016).

William Hoffman suggests, “it wasn’t doctrinaire” for the playwrights to be members of or write for the LGBTQIA+ communities.⁵ Rather, artists were welcome to explore and be free to, in Cino’s often misquoted words, “say what you have to say, do what you have to do.”⁶

One aspect of the pioneer spirit that had to be embraced at Caffè Cino was the excitement of self-production from the ground-up: the playwrights, directors, and actors were entirely responsible to fund and build the show, rather than only performing a single designated artistic role in production.⁷ As Crespy suggests, Cino also “encouraged his playwrights to compete in his arena, even as they helped one another build sets and develop and stage their plays” (my emphasis).⁸ For theatre practitioners that participate in festivals, this spirit of camaraderie should sound familiar: artists helping each other set up and clear off the stage even while vying for “audience favorite,” in those cases where such an award exists.

By the 1970s, Off-Off Broadway, now marked with legitimacy (arts administrators, union contracts, etc.), began feeling the same pressures of viability that envelope most nonprofit theatres in the United States (Bottoms 2004, 266–273; 343–350). However, Off-Off Broadway has thrived thanks to Broadway transfers, such as *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982) and *Urinetown: The Musical* (FringeNYC 2001), and the impact it has had on the aesthetics of young theatre movements.⁹ Early years playwrights include Sam Shepard, LeRoi Jones, Robert Patrick, and Maria Irene Fornes, all of whom would make major contributions to not only produced theatre but also how playwriting is taught.¹⁰ On top of these marks of visible success, Off-Off Broadway still provides a home for more than 500 independent companies driven by the pioneer spirit, outside of the mainstream.

Since 2005, Off-Off Broadway has rebranded itself “New York Indie Theatre,” as a means of moving out from under the shadow of Broadway, complete with its own adjudicated awards through the New York Innovative Theatre Foundation. Through its rebranding, Horse Trade Theater Group remained a staple of

5. ITLMedia. “Caffè Cino, an In the Life Documentary,” *YouTube*, commentary by Michael Billy, July 28, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKS3f5zxdys&t=528s>

6. Wendell C. Stone, *Caffè Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 187.

7. Stone, *Caffè Cino*, 182–183.

8. Crespy, *Off-Off Broadway Explosion*, 38.

9. For example, Geek Theatre, codified by the Vampire Cowboys, has created a sensation throughout regional and college theatre. See my essay, “There’s Too Many of Them,” *Theatre Symposium* 22, no. 1 (2014): 121–133; The University of Alabama Press.

10. For a discussion on how early OOB language-based playwrights have impacted American playwriting courses, see Paul C. Castagno, *New Playwriting Strategies: Language and Media in the 21st Century* (2nd ed., Routledge, 2012).

the downtown theatre arts community, fulfilling its pro-arts mission “to seek out new art, new artists, and new audiences [. . .] by creating an accessible community of varied voices that value collaboration, resourcefulness, diversity, and innovation.”¹¹

Horse Trade Theater Group (HTG) was founded in 1998 by Erez Ziv and Russel Dobular, who had been horse-and-buggy drivers in Central Park, with Kimo DeSean. Their aim was to create both a rental space and a sustainable home for resident companies. At first, HTG operated solely out of The Red Room, a now-defunct performance venue above KGB Bar and The Kraine Theater, a 99-seat proscenium theatre, located on East Fourth Street. Later, HTG would add both The Kraine Theater and the Under St. Marks Theater, a 45-seat black box basement space that has operated as a theatre since the 1960s.¹² Over the past 20 years, HTG has hosted, presented, or produced hundreds of shows featuring scores of resident theatre companies.¹³ While Dobular and DeSean have moved on to other ventures, Ziv remained, and with him came the hope of a second New York Fringe festival.

FRIGID NY: A Second Fringe

The New York International Fringe Festival (FringeNYC) presented its first offerings in 1997. Led by Elena K. Holy, John Clancy, and Dianne Paulus, FringeNYC differed from Edinburgh and festivals that operate under the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF) (which includes members in the United States). The first key difference between FringeNYC and other fringe festivals is that shows are adjudicated rather than selected via a lottery system, with applicants being asked to select a category, such as “dance-movement, clown, mask, puppet, vaudeville, sideshow, magic, burlesque, play, musical.”¹⁴ According to Holy, adjudication includes “80 or so adjudicators” reviewing “30 applications within that category on an individual basis. Then three people who each looked at the same 30 projects get together and hammer out a ranking list.”¹⁵ For Paulus, adjudication is a selling point, as “The Fringe is not a showcase,” but “It is an

11. “About Us,” *Frigid New York @ Horse Trade*, Horse Trade Theatre Group. October 12, 2016. <http://www.horsetrade.info/about>

12. Molly Marinik, “Horse Trade Theater Group: A Theasy Interview with Managing Director Erez Ziv and Artistic Director Heidi Grumelot,” *Theatre Is Easy*, August 2011. <http://www.theasy.com/FeaturedArtist/horsetrade.php>

13. “About Us,” *Frigid New York @ Horse Trade*, Horse Trade Theatre Group

14. Leonard Jacobs and Andrew Salomon, “Leaders of the Pack.” *Backstage*, September 13, 2006. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/leaders-pack-43307/>

15. Jacobs and Andrew, “Leaders of the Pack.”

opportunity to take a risk.”¹⁶ Therefore, hopeful FringeNYC artists must create proposals that demonstrate “vibrancy, innovation, and diversity.”¹⁷

In this regard, the FringeNYC follows a “top-down” model for production suggested by Brian Batchelor. Quoting sociologist Bruce Wilems-Braun, Batchelor writes that in “top-down theatrical production, ‘the economics of production limit what can be produced; rationalized systems of government funding and so-called ‘peer’ evaluation limit the possibilities for writing and performance.’”¹⁸ Although Batchelor is addressing concerns in adjudication with regard to government funding, the “top-down” approach can be applied to FringeNYC, as any form of adjudication puts limitations on theatrical aesthetics, as certain approaches to performance creation that may have been successful one year could be sought out the following year and the year after. Edmonton Fringe, on the other hand, incorporates a lottery system, taking out one of the earliest hurdles toward production, which results in artistic freedom and therefore innovation. Edmonton Fringe (like all members of the CAFF) presents a way to democratize the practice of theatre creation on both an artistic and an administrative level. It is a theatre festival by and for the people driven by a pioneer spirit, resulting in theatrical innovation as a byproduct of democratic practices and not as a brand of top-down production values.¹⁹

In the summer of 2006, Christina Augello, artistic director of San Francisco’s EXIT Theatre, which produces the San Francisco Fringe Festival (a member of CAFF), met with Ziv in the hopes of renting The Red Room. Augello remembers:

We talked about his theatre and mine, and I told him about the SF Fringe and CAFF and invited him to join us as a Fringe Festival that would honor the CAFF mandate in NYC.²⁰

According to their mandate, members of the CAFF must abide by five guiding principles:

“Participants will be selected on a non-juried basis, through a first-come, first served process, a lottery, or other method approved by the Association;”

16. K. Giordano, “Fringe Festival Celebrates Innovation (Highlights of FringeNYC, a Multidisciplinary, Multicultural Event),” *Dance Magazine* 72, no. 8 (August 1998): 29.

17. Giordano, “Fringe Festival Celebrates Innovation,” 29.

18. Batchelor Brian, “‘This Beer Festival Has a Theatre Problem!’: The Evolution and Rebranding of the Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 36.

19. There are several other differences between FringeNYC and other CAFF organizations; however, that would be a paper unto itself. At the time of revising this paper (2021) FringeNYC closed because of the pandemic with no plans to reopen.

20. Christina Augello, personal email, received by John Patrick Bray, October 4, 2016.

“The audience must have the option to pay a ticket price, 100% of which goes directly to the artists;” “Fringe Festival producers have no control over the artistic content of each performance. The artistic freedom of the participants is unrestrained;” “Festivals must provide an easily accessible opportunity for all audiences and all artists to participate in Fringe Festivals;” “Festivals will promote and model inclusivity, diversity and multiculturalism, and will endeavor to incorporate them into all aspects of our organizations.”²¹

In addition, Fringe Festivals that operate under CAFF’s auspices must adhere to its mission “to provide all artists, emerging and established, with the opportunity to produce their play no matter the content, form or style and to make the event as affordable and accessible as possible for the members of the community.”²² These guiding principles are akin to the revolutionary ideals found in the introduction to London’s *Ideal Theatre*, as notions of community building and affordability without questions of professional merit vis-à-vis “form or style” are foregrounded in the Fringe network. Given HTG’s similar mission, Ziv eagerly accepted Augello’s invitation. Augello continues:

It was an immediate connection. EXIT and Horse Trade are very similar in size and philosophy. Erez came to the next annual CAFF conference and I supported his proposal to become a member and in the beginning offered mentor support. I serve on the Board [of FRIGID NY] but Erez and his team at Horse Trade have done the rest.²³

Ziv met with FringeNYC cofounders, and because of the key differences between the practices of FringeNYC and what would become FRIGID NY, it was agreed that he could move forward with a second Fringe festival in NY provided that its schedule was not the same as that of FringeNYC (which runs in late summer). Ziv agreed, deciding to host a late-winter festival.

FRIGID NY opened its doors on March 7, 2007. It ran for 12 days in all three venues: The Red Room, The Kraine Theater, and Under St. Marks. Each participating company had a maximum of 60 minutes to perform and was guaranteed at least five performances.²⁴ According to Ziv,

21. “About CAFF,” *Fringe Festivals*, Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, 2019. <https://fringefestivals.com/about-caff/>

22. Quoted in “Erik Show Details,” *Rising Sun Performance Company*, 2015. <http://risingsunnyc.com/erik.html>

23. Christina Augello, personal email.

24. “Indie Theatre Update,” *American Theatre* 24, no. 3 (March 2007): 15.

FRIGID takes away the two biggest hurdles in theater. It lowers the cost, dramatically opening up the field, to artists that would otherwise be prevented from participating in the conversation by economics. And it takes away the gatekeepers who represents one person's fallible taste, and replaces them with random chance, the very force that produced the universe, by some theories. FRIGID gives a bigger voice and a higher platform to Artists that choose to empower themselves, that helps to drive Artists to do and be their best.²⁵

As artists are given the means to thrive in FRIGID NY, several NYC-based companies have found a second home with the festival. One of those companies is the Rising Sun Performance Company (RSPC), led by Founding Artistic Director Akia Squitieri.

RSPC is a New York Indie Theatre troupe that has been producing since 2001. They have brought several productions to FRIGID NY, including two plays that I wrote (*Goodnight Lovin' Trail* at The Reed Room in 2011; *Erik: A Play About a Puppet* at The Kraine Theatre in 2015). FRIGID NY has seen an increase in audiences over its (at the time of writing this paper in 2016) nine years of operation. Ziv says,

[W]e are reaching new communities. Those young people that don't go to the theatre do go to the theatre when you give them work that more accurately reflects their world. Represent them and they will come, everyone wants to see shows about themselves at the end of the day.²⁶

When discussing audiences for FRIGID NY, Akia (who prefers to use her first name professionally) noted that FRIGID NY had performed a remarkable job of making audiences feel that they were part of the community of artists. Indeed, most of the artists watched each other's shows, and Akia notes, "I found that if an audience member went from one show, they often returned to see others."²⁷ FRIGID NY's built-in audience makes only one component for the success of the festival; as Akia suggests, "in my opinion [FRIGID NY presents] a great cross section [of shows] and every show ends up with at least one review," which is a selling point for so many artistic troupes.²⁸

Looking at the shows presented at FRIGID NY in 2015, one can find the styles and approaches to theatre were quite varied: the pastiche send-up, *Hey 90s Kids: You're Old!*, written and directed by Taryn Parrish; *Richard the Third and Goal*, or

25. Erez Ziv, personal email, received by John Patrick Bray, September 16, 2016.

26. Erez Ziv, personal email, 2016.

27. Akia Squitieri, personal email, received by John Patrick Bray, October 7, 2016.

28. Akia Squitieri, personal email.

RG3, written and directed by Neal J. Freeman (being a hybrid of Shakespeare's text to *Richard III* and the life and words of former Baltimore Raven Ray Lewis); and a zombie musical centered on off-to-college jitters, *The Can Opener: A Brief Horror Musical*, written by M. Zachary Johnson and directed by Kenneth Oefelein. Each work deals with a timely issue: a desire to hang onto youth, the fall of sports heroes, and the anxieties of what we leave behind and may find ahead when we enter a new territory. Each is built from different aesthetic approaches that played with audience members' sensibilities, and yet these shows seemed to resonate with the audience by approaching topics that were important to their lives. And as each work is aesthetically different, audiences embrace the pioneer spirit every time the lights dim.

***Erik* at FRIGID NY (A Case Study)**

The lottery system for FRIGID is pretty straightforward: you prepare an application and submit it through FRIGID NY's portal, which opens on a given midnight, usually sometime in November. FRIGID NY accepts the first 15 submissions. The next 30 submissions are entered into a lottery, in which 15 more are selected. As stated earlier, there is no adjudication. I was a resident writer with RSPC during their residency with HTG. We submitted our show *Erik: A Play About a Puppet* to the lottery in November 2014, and we were among the first 15 submissions. Once we received the message, we immediately began crowdfunding via an IndieGoGo campaign.

Erik is a 60-minute adaptation of Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, featuring copious nods to various other adaptations. The central character, Erik, was performed by puppeteer Kervin Peralta. A carnival barker (played by Yair Ben-dor), and his wife, Madame Giry (played by Destiny Shegstad), encounter the audience as if leading them through a carnival freak show: they present each scene or vignette and move aside as the action plays out.

Jerrod Bogard directed the production, having staged two readings of the play. Because RSPC is an ensemble-based work, Bogard decided to treat the play as another member of the cast:

We created a cohesive group of performers using improv and devising techniques, working for several weeks before introducing the script to the process. In this way, we invited the script into the world of our ensemble.²⁹

29. Jerrod Bogard, "Erik: A Play About a Puppet." *InkyThumbs*, January 13, 2019. www.inkythumbs.com/erik.html

Jak Prince served as resident technical director and set designer for RSPC and worked closely with Bogard on the design of the show. The set for *Erik* consisted of a puppet stage that belonged to Bogard, a few curtains, and a sheet that was used to project a shadow puppet of a hanged stagehand. Prince also served as a lighting designer. One of the challenges, Prince says, was creating moody, atmospheric area lighting within the confines of the general lighting plot; however, he was ultimately satisfied with the experience.³⁰

The design team was rounded out by sound designer Ian Wherle, who composed original music for the song "Follow"; Antonio Consuerga designed costumes, who, with assistant costume designer Ashleigh Herndon, built or borrowed a number of pieces that created a cohesive palette; and the production was stage-managed by David Pilchman.

Puppeteer Kervin Peralta, who worked extensively with the Swedish Cottage Marionette Theater, was responsible for building and performing the two puppets: the first was a plush puppet named "Perfect Baby," and the second was "Erik," a stick puppet. Peralta built the Erik puppet out of scraps that he found near/in the garbage "two blocks away" from his apartment, including a broomstick (which served as the body) and window blinds that he used to build the shoulders.³¹ The skeletal head was pre-made. Peralta continues,

I patterned the rod puppet after a skull rod puppet that [Swedish Cottage Marionette Theater] used in our production of *Hansel and Gretel Halloween Adventures*. I had to create something that was large enough to cover me when I was on stage.³²

Peralta used one hand to move the puppet, while the other served as Erik's own right hand. The puppet wore a mask, also created by Peralta, for the better part of the play.

Given that the Erik character is so well known thanks to a host of famous actors portraying him in large-budgeted theatre, film, and television productions for nearly a century, it was a gamble for us all to make such an iconic character a mute stick man; however, our group had faith that we could pull off a truly unique vision. *Erik* opened on Thursday, February 19, 2015, at 10:30 p.m. at The Kraine Theatre.

30. Jak Prince, personal email, received by John Patrick Bray, January 24, 2019.

31. Kervin Peralta, personal email, received by John Patrick Bray, January 24, 2019.

32. Kervin Peralta, personal email.

Response to the Play

At the time of our production, FRIGID NY had a wonderful press agent in Emily Owens, who was able to bring a number of independent critics to the festival. Sarah Moore of *Theatre Is Easy* wrote, “*Erik* is an enjoyable hour of the Frigid Festival, especially for fans of *Phantom of the Opera* who have a sense of humor”;³³ Edmond Malin of *NY Theatre Now* enthused, “The carnival freak in all of us will find something to enjoy about *Erik*,” a “schadenfreude-smörgåsbord” akin to “TV Soap Opera *Dark Shadows*.”³⁴ Leah Richards of *Culture Catch* suggests that *Erik* departs from its various sources “to make the point that ‘heroes’ are created from the blood and misery of others, and the play eventually almost completely erases the lines between heroes and villains, as well as between who is a ‘puppet’ and who is not.”³⁵ *Erik* sold out the house during its five-performance run, earning the FRIGID NY Sold Out Award. Prior to its close, HTG and RSPC co-produced two encore performances, which saw the return of a handful of enthusiasts (one audience member told me during the second encore performance that it was his fourth time seeing the show). Additionally, downtown theatre audiences and the New York Innovative Theatre Foundation nominated Matt Peptitone (who played “Detective”) for an NYIT Award for Best Supporting Actor.

Erik was built from the ground-up—from a borrowed puppet stage, borrowed costumes, some trash, hand-painted signs, and a crowd-sourcing campaign. At the end of each performance, the actors and creative team would stop for a beer, a warm community of pioneer artists. The play is now available for licensing with Next Stage Press.

FRIGID Conclusions

Erik was an aesthetic risk; however, RSPC recouped the costs of production while giving the artists involved the opportunity to work on a piece that was both collaborative and unabashedly theatrical. Yair Ben-Dor, now a working television actor, has said that *Erik* “was possibly the most fun I ever had doing theatre.”³⁶ As a nonprofessional theatre company, RSPC truly embraces pioneer spirit; as

33. Sarah Moore, “Review of *Erik*,” *Theatre is Easy*, February 22, 2015. <http://www.theeasy.com/Reviews/2015/E/erik.php>

34. Edmond Malin, Edmund. Review of *Erik*. *NY Theatrenow*, 2015. <http://www.nytheatrenow.com/Content/Article/2015-2-22-erik>

35. Leah Richards, “Baby, It’s Cold Outside – Frigid New York Festival 2015,” *Culture Catch*, Pet Rock, Inc., March 2015. <http://www.culturecatch.com/theater/frigid-new-york-festival-2015-part-2>

36. Yair Ben Dor, “Theater,” *YairBenDor.com*, 2019. <https://www.yairbendor.com/theater>

with the founders of Horse Trade Theatre Group, Christina Augello, Erez Ziv, and so many others that participate in festivals around the world, members of RSPC are all lovers of theatre in its plurality of styles, in those works that take risks, in those works that perhaps do not, while co-creating endless imaginative possibilities with devoted Fringe audiences. (At the time of this publication, FRIGID NY is now *the* Fringe Festival of NYC.)

About the author: John P. Bray's (PhD, MFA, University of Georgia) essays have been published in *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre Symposium*, *New England Theatre Journal*, *Texas Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*; and he has contributed chapters to *Embodied Playwriting*, *The Composer on Screen*, *The Routledge Companion to Absurdist Literature*, and a co-authored chapter in *Mapping Smallville*. His plays include *Friendly's Fire* (Barter Theatre), *Tracks* (O'Neill Semifinalist), *Erik* (FRIGID NY), and *Goodnight Lovin' Trail* (Rising Sun Performance NYC also at FRIGID NY). His screenplays include *Liner Notes* (Woodstock Film Festival) and the short *Escapism* (in festivals). His audio dramas include *The Demon Lady* (Gather by the Ghost Light) and *Seal Island* (LIGHTS UP!/Ensemble Theatre of Chattanooga). His plays are published by Next Stage Press, Original Works Publishing, Heartland Plays, Off the Wall Publishing, and in various journals. He has edited anthologies for Applause Theatre and Cinema Books (most recently, *Stage It and Stream It: Plays for Virtual Theater*) and is the Graduate Coordinator in UGA's Department of Theatre and Film Studies.

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