



Colin Dabkowski

COMMENTARY

## Keeping Fringe from unraveling

When organizers of the mammoth arts event known as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe invited Donovan King to their recent conference of global Fringe festivals in Scotland, they had no idea what they were signing up for.

They surely knew that King, who founded the Montreal Infringement Festival in 2004 and later helped export that event to Buffalo, is perhaps the world's most outspoken critic of the hundreds of festivals around the world that are based on Edinburgh's Fringe. They likely knew that he has committed a big part of his life to fighting against the modern Fringe fest model, which he and his collaborators view as too heavily influenced by corporations, too expensive for artists and antithetical to the values of its own founders.

But they probably didn't expect him to set up shop at his table wearing a sinister "V for Vendetta" mask, to proselytize so openly for the open-access Infringement Festival model that's

**Corporate sponsorship robs Fringe artists of their agency to bring about social and political change**

become so popular in Buffalo or to speak up so loudly and consistently against the very festival that had invited him to the conference.

Nor, I am positive, did they expect King to distribute dozens of copies of the

Buffalo Infringement schedule and a Gusto cover story on the Buffalo Infringement Festival in which he figured prominently, nor to induce gasps from the assembled crowd by sarcastically suggesting the Edinburgh Fringe name itself after a multibillion dollar corporation.

King is the dictionary definition of a rabble-rouser. His consistently amusing dispatches from the World Fringe Congress, compiled on his website at [www.optative.net](http://www.optative.net), comprise a powerful chronicle of one man's perhaps quixotic attempt to fight the power and to insert his own radical viewpoint into the conversation. (In addition to which, it is frequently hilarious: "When I met the Lord Provost, the Right Honourable Donald Wilson," King wrote of his introduction to the mayor of Edinburgh, "I shook his hand, introduced myself, and told him about the infringement festival, joking that maybe it would appear in Edinburgh one day. He chuckled and directed me to the free glasses of wine.")

But the thing is that King's ideas really aren't radical, or at least shouldn't be. They go to the heart of why we have freedom of expression in the first place and speak directly to the true power of art. His argument – that more corporate sponsorship and more cultural gate-keeping robs Fringe artists of their agency to bring about social and political change – ought to be a no-brainer.

That it is not, has worked to the advantage of Buffalonians, who get to have the totally open-source Infringement Festival (which welcomed more than 800 individual performances this summer) with none of the pesky problems associated with a traditional "Fringe" festival. King's trip to Edinburgh to plant the seeds of dissent in the place where the Fringe was born is an unexpected development that has already resulted in the minting of a new Infringement Festival in Ipswich.

King left Edinburgh with some key questions:

"Did I get my message across about the need to safeguard the Fringe-proper, or is the once-ethereal Fringe doomed to be endlessly co-opted by corporate interests and overzealous administrators? Is it destined to be locked into structures that favour corporations and bureaucrats over artists, especially those who struggle just to make ends meet?"

In Edinburgh, the questions remain. But in Buffalo, where Infringement has grown into the region's most active and diverse annual festival, the answer is already clear.

email: [cdabkowski@buffnews.com](mailto:cdabkowski@buffnews.com)



Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

J. Geils Band lead singer Peter Wolf, right and guitarist Duke Levine perform Friday night at the Erie Canal Harbor Central Wharf.

## J. Geils Band reclaims its R&B roots

BY JEFF MIERS

NEWS POP MUSIC CRITIC

If you still held any doubts concerning the idea that rock 'n' roll keeps you young, those doubts should not have survived Friday evening's performance by the mighty J. Geils Band at the Central Wharf.

Led by the one and only Peter Wolf, the group brought a seriously swanky blend of rhythm 'n' blues and straight-up garage rock 'n' roll to a massive crowd on a beautiful night. And though the band members are all eligible for Social Security by this point, man, you'd never have known it from the performance. As has long been the case, Wolf could teach a thing or two to any singer considering fronting a band. He is the greatest living Caucasian frontman this side of Mick Jagger.

Interestingly, the J. Geils Band performed Friday sans its namesake, original guitarist J. Geils, who is currently suing the band over the use of its name – which happens to be his.

### CONCERT REVIEW

#### The J. Geils Band

Part of Buffalo Place Rocks the Harbor. Friday evening at the Erie Canal Harbor Central Wharf.

None of that mattered Friday. With the help of guitarist Duke Levine, Wolf, keyboardist Seth Justman, bassist Danny Klein and harp player Richard "Magic Dick" Salwitz – founding members all – tore through a smoking set on the Buffalo waterfront, for the first time since the band's early '80s appearance at the old Aud as part of the "Freeze Frame" tour.

This time around, the group was not emphasizing its more pop-oriented material – though it should be noted that the group only had one massive hit album in the first place, the everywhere-at-once "Freeze Frame" and its hit single, "Centerfold." Anyone familiar with the group only from that album

was in for a surprise Friday, as the group delivered a two-hour set of tunes culled from its earliest albums, torrid hybrids of Chicago blues and primal rock all.

Opening with a one-two punch from its 1974 self-titled debut, the band made it plain that it had come to, as the title from its mid-1970s live album suggested, "Blow your face out." Wolf boogied about the stage like a man aflame, and Magic Dick strode to the front of the stage, clad in leather and donning shades, to blow harp solos owing more than a nod to the legendary Little Walter.

Wolf didn't so much wander about the stage as prowl from side to side, leading the band, engaging the crowd, dancing like a 20-year-old and making it plain that blues, soul and rock 'n' roll still pumped through his veins with the same ferocity helped make the J. Geils Band one of the most revered live acts of the '70s.

The set list was killer, incorporating the likes of "Homework," "Southside Shuffle," "Cry One More

Time" – famously covered by Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris back before the JGB was a commercial concern – and the ferocious boogie chestnut "Pack Fair and Square." In fact, the "hits" – "Centerfold" and "Love Stinks," for example – didn't arrive until near the end. It did, indeed, feel that the band was reclaiming its roots as an R&B tour-de-force live act.

The band members left it all on the stage in what was surely one of the most exhilarating performances of the summer.

Openers Handsome Jack, a smoking garage rock/acid blues band from Buffalo, and the Matt Facciolla Band, a group comprising Buffalo music scene expatriates specializing in a Springsteen/Petty/Willie Nile influenced brand of singer/songwriter fare, warmed the crowd up with aplomb.

It all added up to one of the finest shows on any Buffalo stage this summer.

email: [jmiers@buffnews.com](mailto:jmiers@buffnews.com)

*'You Can't Take It With You' is a fine choice for volunteer troupe in an outdoor venue*

## Comedy is a sweet and humble confection

BY BEN SIEGEL

NEWS CONTRIBUTING REVIEWER

You can't take it with you, but you'll want to. After seeing the annual summer offering of the Hamburg Theatre Under the Stars, running through the weekend, you may want to move right in.

Their production of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's 1936 seminal comedy, "You Can't Take It With You," is everything it should be: sweet, convivial, zany and smart. Of course, the play, which earned Kaufman and Hart the 1937 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, continues to stand on its own sturdy legs.

The story revolves around the unconventional Sycamore household, which might as well exist under a circus tent. The mom flies from one artistic hobby to the next; the dad makes fireworks in the basement. One daughter dances around the living room in her ballerina tutu – a grown up, she is childish and annoying – and grandpa is being investigated by the IRS for what appears to be lifelong tax evasion. The other daughter is embarrassed by her loving family, however, and is afraid to show them off to her new suitor. Hilarity thus ensues.

It's such a perfect premise, and you'll recognize its trappings from countless films, TV shows and plays that have come since. It might be



John Hickey/Buffalo News

From left, Patrick Tighe, Marissa MacTurk, Mairidy Kanips and Norm Argulski perform a scene from "You Can't Take it With You."

### ART REVIEW

#### Hamburg Theatre Under the Stars *You Can't Take It With You*

★★★★½ (out of 4)

hard to mess this one up, but it can't be easy to do so well, especially given the conditions of an outdoor stage. (Be prepared to miss a few lines here and there. Wind does wonders to body microphones.)

It is a fine choice for this kind of production, in this environment.

The Theater Under the Stars

group is an unusual organization. They are completely volunteer-based, from artistic director and founder Tony Baksa, right down to the backstage team. The company produces one play every Labor Day weekend in the Village of Hamburg's Memorial Park bandstand.

There are no tickets, so admission is free, and volunteers sell raffle tickets and take donations in upturned hats.

It is, in every sense, a humble community production. Set it in black and white, and you can see Ronnie Howard walking with his

fishing pole in the distance. It's all so nostalgic and endearing, but somehow not saccharine, just humble and honest. Thankfully, the production lives up to its setting.

Director Marc Ruffino has an excellent cast here. Every character in the play's three acts (there are two intermissions, so get your place in the ice cream line early) is archetypal, and therefore welcome to a community company like this.

Katie McMahon is delightful as daughter Essie, the grown-up princess-fairy-dancer. McMahon brings out Essie's physical humor wonderfully, though there's room for her to bring in some subtlety to the curiously odd girl.

Kathleen Denecke and Patrick Tighe, as lovebirds Alice and Tony, respectively, are grounded and fresh. They play where your head, as an audience member, is, which is a smart approach.

Many others are wonderful, but Norm Argulski takes the cake as grandpa Martin. He's got that age-old grandpa thing down, where you're always loved and never without attention. He probably has a wrapped caramel in his pocket for you.

That's really what this production, in this beautiful village park setting is: a wrapped caramel. It's familiar and kind, chewy and buttery, and oh so pleasing.

FRIDAY  
IN GUSTO...



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**DINING:** *Having a d'Vine time in Lockport.*  
**MOVIES:** *Bradley Cooper finds "The Words."*  
**CLUB WATCH:** *Catch team spirit at the Rockpile.*