

## The Real Fringe

Is the Seattle Fringe Festival becoming—gasp—*legit*?

Well, executive director Michael Olich certainly hopes so. This year's festival, which will present 90 companies in 11 days (March 11–22) is now in its eighth year, and recently received an exciting boost from two stalwarts of Seattle's not-for-profit theatre community: A Contemporary Theatre and the Seattle Repertory Theatre. ACT has offered its Bullitt Cabaret as a venue during the festival. Meanwhile, the Rep will host the "Best of the Festival" revival March 27–29 at its Ponce Theatre.

Though a "best of" performance may sound rather unfringe-like, Olich maintains that it's staying within the festival's decidedly democratic (one might even say anarchistic) roots. "All



Martha Enson in *Pandora* at the Seattle Fringe Festival.

audience members who purchase a \$2 discount button—which gives them a 20 percent discount on all events—are eligible to vote," he says. "The motivation is definitely to get the audience to graze, but the way we look at it, the button's cheaper than a latte. And in this town that means something."

## Everybody's Arthur Kopit

Arthur Kopit's plays are no stranger to diversity. From *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*, a burlesque farce with hints of Camus, to his hauntingly subdued book for *Phantom*, a musical adaptation of *Phantom of the Opera* that predated the Lloyd Webber version, Kopit's work travels a giddily disparate trajectory. He's a writer who can meet a theatre programmer's demands for tragedy and comedy in one fell swoop.

"That's precisely why I chose him for our first season," says Jane Unger, the artistic director of Portland, Ore.'s Profile Theatre Project, a new company devoted to focusing on a

single playwright each year. "That, and the fact that he's a really sexy writer." Behold the three sexy Kopit gems that Unger is producing at the Profile: *Wings*, *Indians* and *Road to Nirvana*.

"What ultimately excites me about theatre is the writing—I think I'm a closet



Gaynor Sterchi in *Wings*, part of Profile Theatre Project's Arthur Kopit (upper left) celebration.

So, with the smell of legitimacy in the air, does that mean that Seattle is going to follow the lead of other fringe festivals—notably New York City's controversial version—and start jurying the event? No way, says Olich.

"The theme of this year's festival is 'Naked Fringe—there's nothing between you and the art,'" he notes. "We believe in open access—an unjuried, uncensored event. The application process is done on a first-come, first-serve basis, and that idea is a model for audience responsibility. That's how it has been done for 50 years at the original fringe festival—Edinburgh—and that's what fringe is all about. It puts the responsibility firmly into the hands and pockets of the audience, with no managers getting in the way. And personally, I think it's the wave of the future."—Stephen Nunns

writer sometimes. So I reasoned, doing a season with just one writer is working in New York for the Signature Theatre Company, why not do it here in Portland?" she says.

The only hitch thus far has been the somewhat vociferous objections that certain members of Portland's Native American community have had to the mounting of *Indians*, Kopit's 1968 play that displays Native Americans in a satirical light. "The intention of *Indians* isn't literal—it's about the cultural processes that makes people become symbols," says Kopit. "It's about the Wild West and the land grab and how in our history we have justified all of this awfulness. But people don't deal with irony very well these days, do they?"—James Oseland

## October Theatre Almanac

### 100 years ago (1898):

America's most influential *fin-de-siècle* vaudeville act, Joe Weber and Lew Fields, open their Broadway parody, *The Con-Cur-ers*—a play that contains the first recorded instance of a man getting a pie in the face.

### 75 years ago (1923):

The Theatre Guild produces Elmer Rice's expressionistic play *The Adding Machine* on Broadway; Dudley Digges, Helen Westley and Edward G. Robinson star.

### 50 years ago (1948):

Jean-Paul Sartre's play *The Respectful Prostitute* is transferred from Greenwich Village to Broadway's Cort Theatre. Thornton Wilder's *Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* is presented as an unlikely curtain-raiser.

### 25 years ago (1973):

Lanford Wilson's *The Hot I Baltimore* opens at the Circle in the Square downtown, directed by Marshall Mason. Earlier in the season, Circle Repertory Company had premiered the play in an actual hotel lobby.

The Performance Group, under the direction of Richard Schechner, presents Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime* at the Performing Garage. Shepard disapproves of Schechner's acoustical approach to his rock-and-roll musical, but grudgingly lets the show go on. The production, in which future Wooster Group members Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte appear, garners an Obie.

### 10 years ago (1988):

Lincoln Center Theatre presents David Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow*, directed by Gregory Mosher. The production spawns a media frenzy: theatrical newcomer Madonna plays opposite stage veterans Joe Mantegna and Ron Silver. Madonna receives decent reviews, though at least one critic complains that the pop star is unable to project.

Sandra Bernhard's one-woman "performance of comedy and songs," *Without You*