

ARTS

Wild car ride is more fringe than Fringe

New Infringement Festival rolls out provocative show

BY RAINA DELISLE

If you're looking for a good time in the back seat of a car, this weekend is your chance to get frisky.

Car Stories, the only show ever kicked out of a Canadian fringe festival, is coming to Ottawa this weekend as part of the city's first Infringement Festival.

Optative Theatrical Laboratories' *Car Stories* is Montreal's longest-running "theatre experiment," says JC McLean, Infringement organizer, and artistic facilitator for *Car Stories* in Ottawa and Buffalo, New York.

McLean says the roving, interactive show — which borrows city streets, bars and actors' and organizers' parked cars for its stage, and which often involves spectators in the performance — is a progressive act that challenges the traditional structures and definition of theatre — an ideal mandate for fringe.

But in a 2001 performance at the Montreal Fringe Festival, a playful attempt by an actor to charge a *Montreal Gazette* critic for a ticket sparked a chain of unprecedented events in festival history. Rumours circulated that the *Gazette*, a major sponsor of the event, would halt festival coverage and withdraw funding. *Gazette* management denied the rumours, and Fringe producer Jeremy Hechtman said his decision to show the troupe the backstage door had nothing to do with the ticket confrontation, but rather complaints about noise.

Car Stories appealed its exile but received no response from the Canadian

Association of Fringe Festivals, according to McLean. CAFF oversees 25 fringe festivals in North America and has the terms "fringe" and "fringe festival" locked in a trademark.

Undeterred, *Car Stories* ran independently for two years in Montreal. Last year, Optative Theatrical Laboratories and Travesty Theatre created the Infringement Festival to bring together like-minded acts and promote theatre activism, culture-jamming and critical arts — using existing mass media to comment on media.

"We want to infringe on the monoculture that surrounds us, infringe on the fringe, infringe on anything that people find oppressive," McLean says.

The festival protests corporate takeover and trademarking of the fringe movement, McLean says.

"I hope Infringement changes how arts and festivals are done in this country. I want people to feel liberated enough to challenge the structures of this corporate world we live in."

There's a lot that makes Infringement different from the fringe. "We don't charge the artists, whereas the CAFF has rules to charge and some fests ask \$400 to \$600. I think that's disgusting; it's economic discrimination and almost censorship," McLean says.

Sponsorship is another contentious issue. "We only accept ethical sponsors that pose no conflict of interest, we investigate our sponsors and we never put the sponsor's name in the name of the festival."

McLean says an infringement can be any size — there were more than 60 acts in Montreal this year after nine months of planning by a team of almost 40 organizers and volunteers, but last year's six-show mini-infringe-

ment in Toronto was put together in four days.

New York City and Buffalo are on the infringement map this summer with full lineups, but the Ottawa installment of the festival is starting out small, with *Car Stories* and *Death by Latté* heading the bill. McLean says Infringement will continue to explore new markets and plans are underway for festivals in the Maritimes next year.

McLean says Infringement is just trying to give people another choice and has a good relationship with other fringe festivals save Montreal where, he says, "they are a little antagonistic toward us."

The Montreal Fringe Festival and Infringement ran during the same two weeks in June as a "playful challenge," McLean said. The Fringe responded by setting up a stage next to Infringement headquarters.

McLean said the noise and activity from the Fringe stage was slightly disturbing, but they played with it by chalking "fringe" and "cultural disaster" on the street.

Car Stories will be on the road tomorrow between 7:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. and Sunday between 2:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m., with a new show leaving from the Ottawa Jail Hostel at 75 Nicholas St. every half-hour. The show is pay-what-you-can.

Also watch your local Starbucks for impromptu performances of Reverend Billy's *Death by Latté*. You might choke on your Mint Mocha Chip Frappuccino when your "coffee experience" is interrupted by actors debating the ethics of the brewing powerhouse.