



Fringe shows celebrate
its boundless creativity

Description

St-Ambroise Montréal Fringe Festival 2022 drew large numbers of fans

By Faith Langston

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All good things must come to an end as did the **St-Ambroise Montréal Fringe Festival** on June 19. Audiences flocked back to the live shows in large numbers, making it one of the more successful Fringe festivals ever. Here are reviews from a sampling of those shows.

A Paisley Mind

A Paisley Mind, Gabrielle Banville tells us, began as a ten-minute art project and evolved into a heartfelt monologue. The audience is cast headlong into the mind of Marie Claire: we witness her clear and hazy memories, love and the pain of being misunderstood, combined with the frustrating fits of anger that accompany Alzheimer's disease. Edith Piaf songs, a mixture of English and French and perhaps even contributions from Banville's relatives add texture and an authentic touch to this Montreal piece.



A Paisley Mind – Image: Brooklyn Melnick

The mostly young audience was thrilled with Banville's magical transformation into an 85-year-old woman. And rightly so. She obviously did directors **Brooklyn Meinik** and **Emma Tibaldo** proud. Older members like myself found the play more sobering. With the rapidly ageing population, is Alzheimer's going to become more and more common? Is there anything to be done about it? Well, perhaps there is. Banville has generously donated part of the proceeds of her work to the **Société d'Alzheimer de Montréal**.

If you tell your doctor that you think you have Alzheimer's, he or she will probably reassure you that this is unlikely. The full-fledged condition doesn't allow the sufferer to reflect much on his condition.

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Everybody Knows: Come Emote with me

Fifty years ago, I listened to **Leonard Cohen**'s first album. I remember playing and replaying the record, trying my best to understand the meaning of what seemed to be esoteric words. Did Leonard Cohen mean it when he said he didn't have "a secret chart" to get him to "the heart of this or any other matter?"



Everybody Knows: Come Emote With Me – Image: Joseph Ste-Marie

Rita Sheena's Fringe performance *Everybody Knows: Come Emote With Me* brings Cohen's world to life through movement. Sheena begins with sociable dancing at a disco and becomes increasingly visceral when interpreting themes such as loneliness, despair, sensuality and, yes, even exaltation. Cohen's lyrics are enhanced not only by her superb twirls, swirls, spins and swivels, a multitude of costumes and well-chosen props – a telephone, a suitcase, a sleeping bag, a spike tiara – but by a soundtrack produced by two Swedish sisters who comprise the folk duo **First Aid Kit**.

As for the search for meaning in Cohen's words through emoting, Sheena explores a depth of emotion, which is open to all. There is no 'secret chart', just an opening of awareness, an expansion of consciousness. Cohen is the first to confess:

"I'm just reeling, man. I'm just reeling. Sometimes in the midst of the thing I don't know how I do it, you know. Like I manage to get my daily life together, to get this tour together. But most of the time I'm staggering under the blows. It's no doubt that I contrive these blows for myself. I think everyone is responsible for their own condition."

Is this Yours?

Loquacious, five-time winner of the 'Best of the Fest' award, **Al Lafrance** graced le Petit Campus on Prince Arthur with his story *Is this Yours*. He began with a nod to the internet – after all, it does connect us. For example, through social media, a camera found by a benevolent good citizen (him actually) could easily be returned to its owner.

'For Lafrance, nothing or no one is insignificant... Moments big and small are to be savoured, not squandered on your cell phone.'



Is This Yours? – Image: courtesy of the St-Ambroise Montréal Fringe Festival

But what are the other effects of the ubiquitous internet – “a great dangling creature full of viruses” which has, of course, taken over our lives? Don’t the lives of the wealthy and glamorous we are endlessly exposed to make our existence seem pale by comparison? Are there other aspects of life we should be considering?

LaFrance thinks so. He is fascinated by hidden stories, unexpected finds which can turn up in garage sales or thrift stores. He finds records – the product of an at-home do-it-yourself recording project made many years ago, which he manages to return to family members. Life has unexpected turns. The collection of love letters he uncovers doesn’t culminate in the expected Hollywood happy ending but instead in a divorce decree. In LaFrance’s world, ‘weirdos’ with ‘passion projects’ also have their place in the grand scheme of things. People like Scott Marshall attained ‘quiet fame’ with his board game ‘Hitchhiker’ after being forced to give up hope of mass-producing it. Perhaps this brought the inventor all the satisfaction he really wanted.

For LaFrance, nothing or no one is insignificant. A word or gesture made years ago may somehow impart wisdom or bring comfort. Moments big and small are to be savoured, not squandered on your cell phone.

Saltzman’s Antiques

Fringe fans were treated to some excellent acting on Thursday night at the popular Theatre la Comédie de Montréal. **Carolyn Guillet**, a former Dawson professor, returned to the stage after a thirteen-year hiatus. Guillet’s role as Sandy, an antique store owner, unfolded flawlessly. ***Saltzman’s Antiques*** was written by comedian **Sam Lemieux**, who also co-acts with Guillet, playing the part of Nathan. Nathan may be a contender to take over the store, but there are obstacles to overcome.

‘Finally, things only have the value that we chose to attribute to them. Lemieux has succeeded in creating believable roles in this exploration of ownership, loyalty and freedom.’

“All these antiques meant something to someone at one time,” Nathan observes. Finally, things only have the value that we chose to attribute to them. Lemieux has succeeded in creating believable roles in this exploration

of ownership, loyalty and freedom.

What About Albert?

Xander Chung's play *What about Albert*, we are told in the programme, is “an existential exploration of work and culture and job titles.” An opening conversation between co-workers Pic (**Fanny Dvorkin**) and Pod (**Jordan Prentice**) thrusts us into the underpaid, insecure life in the fast-food industry. Pic, a vegetarian, has dreams of transcending mundane preoccupations, while Pod is immersed in a kind of cynical resignation.

Costumes and a sci-fi monster, both created by **Samantha Gold**, existential elements, and a committed cast, all work together to make *What about Albert* a strikingly original, ‘comedy adjacent’ play. However, underneath the entertaining aspects of the play lie some serious issues.

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Should working conditions found in the fast-food industry – the exploitation of workers, no job security – be allowed in Canada? Will the ‘Great Resignation’ improve the lot of unskilled workers over the long term? So far, these questions remain unanswered.



Would Virginia Woolf Contemplate on Suicide if She Were Filipino? – Image: courtesy of Voices of Asia International

Would Virginia Woolf Contemplate on Suicide if She Were Filipino?

Revan Badingham III has written a play which is as intriguing as its title. Two young Filipino men, Lemar (**Roy Vhinson**) and Warren (**Marc Ducusin**), who have linked up on the dating site (Manhunter!), meet for the first time. Perceptive writing and excellent acting (and perhaps an unusually short rehearsal time of eight days) work together to create a powerful chemistry between the two young men.

Lemar is alone in his sterile Montreal apartment with hackneyed Christmas carols to remind him that he is an outsider. Is brownness “a recipe for being lonely” he asks. We might wonder whether he’s looking for a sexual encounter or a friend. And just what is intimacy? Undressing? Getting to know the basic facts about a person?

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The looming issue of inequality enlarges the scope of the play. Can the voices of the hungry be ignored forever? Warren comes from an affluent family, while Lemar’s mother lives on the verge of starvation. Her struggle consists in staying alive. Suicide is out of the question.

This challenging, well-crafted play was presented to a receptive audience on Saturday afternoon, June 11. Cast and audience alike appreciated the welcoming attention they received at Le Théâtre La Comédie de Montréal.

Feature image: What About Albert?, courtesy of the St-Ambroise Montréal Fringe Festival

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Faith Langston is a Concordia graduate with a long-standing interest in theatre, who works as a literacy tutor.

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