

10 Things I Loved About the 2015 Hollywood Fringe Festival

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Here's a question for you Angelenos: What has a 2000 person workforce, puts on more shows than any other theatre festival in the country, runs for over three weeks in June in dozens of theaters, and is probably Hollywood's longest party of the year? The answer of course is the Hollywood Fringe Festival, which in its fifth year has grown larger than ever, and is my binge of choice for the month of June. I average three plays or musicals a day (which can run as short as 30 minutes and cost as little as \$10 each). The shows run the gamut of gamuts and are true labors of love created on a shoestring and represent the next generation of L.A. creatives.



With a massive amount of homespun shows (roughly 300 total), there are, admittedly, a few clunkers in the bunch, but very few. Frankly I found it a challenge squeezing all the great stuff that rocked my world this past month into one article, so in no order, here are ten things I truly loved...

1. *Tom & Barry 2 Nights Only*

Punk rock's greatest would-be Siamese twin brother act, Tom & Barry aka The Bang Bang (think Sex Pistols meets The Cramps) blew the roof off Fringe with their tragic, angsty musical drama, backed by a great live band. Based on the cult film, *Brothers Of The Head*, this furious and touching fable was adapted for the stage by actor/producer Matt Herrmann (who rocked Fringe 2014 in the award winning musical *Bronies*). Connected by a shared liver, Tom & Barry's sibling rivalry made the Oasis brothers' in-fighting seem tame.

Kyle Davis (left, Tom) and Matt Herrmann (right, Barry) Photo by Vickie Mendoza



2: Great Comedic Performances

2a. Speaking of punk rock, few actresses in history can match the off camera fireworks of Tallulah Bankhead, who was resurrected to beastly, full-blooded life by Olivia Choate in Octavio Carlin's stylish comedy *Hollywood & Broadway*. Olivia's snarling, warts-and-all performance as the troubled diva drew huge laughs even when standing still. Writer/Director Carlin, an acclaimed fashion designer, created the show's stunning 1951 period costumes, befitting the show's dueling screen legends, Bankhead, Gloria Swanson (Kat Brower) and Aileen

Pringle (Christina Lemon).

Olivia Choate (center) as Tallulah Bankhead, Kat Brower as Gloria Swanson far left, and Christina Lemon as Aileen Pringle (seated) Photo by Naomi Torres



2b. While Choate took no prisoners as Tallulah, the best male comedy performance at Fringe belonged to Damien Luvara who completely transformed into Tony Danza, circa mid 80s. Yes, Tony Danza of *Taxi* and *Who's The Boss* fame had his own tribute at Fringe. Luvara not only nailed every detail of Danza's voice, laugh and body movements in the absurd comedy *Boss: The Untold Tony Danza Story*, he also gets big bonus points for writing and creating the show.

Damien Luvara as Tony Danza (Photo courtesy of Hollywood Fringe Festival)



3. *Smile, Baby*

The show that had me laughing more than any other was Savannah Dooley's *Smile, Baby* - but it's much more than a comedy - it's a dozen, smart, poignant vignettes exploring the emotions women (from tweens to seniors) experience when harassed by catcalling men. Dooley, who won me over with her writing on ABC Family's teen drama, *Huge*, makes her playwriting debut here, and it's a memorable one. Touching, slightly dangerous, and very hilarious, *Smile, Baby* and its strong female ensemble will have an encore performance at some point in the next week.

Jessica Leverdad DeBruin and Sonia Jackson in *Smile, Baby* (photo by William Ayala)



4. *My Gay Husband*

I happened upon the adorable 1950s-style sit com, *My Gay Husband*, the same day that the Supreme Court declared gay marriage as legal. In *My Gay Husband*, *Ozzie and Harriet*-esque Beau and Dottie (Matt Austin and Fiona Gubelmann in performances that make me smile just thinking about it) work to keep Beau's homosexuality a guarded secret from the nosy neighbors. And in true retro-TV style (with writer/producer Kara Lee Burk's clever touch) it's all handled refreshingly sweet, sans any millennial cynicism, complete with TV Applause prompters, and period Mr. Clean commercials. I've been happily informed that *Fringe*'s most delightful comedy will recur again in staged episodes. Find news on *My Gay Husband* on Facebook.



5. *Bright Swords*

All I can say is WOW when thinking about Ryan Vincent Anderson in the tour de force, one man historical play, *Bright Swords*. A Geffen or Mark Taper worthy-drama, *Bright Swords* tells the epic story of Ira Aldridge, an African American actor who fled New York in 1825 to become a star on the European stage in London and helped changed the tide of slavery in the British Empire. Written by Ric Creese and directed by Jeff Wienckowski, this was Anderson's Fringe debut - and oh what a debut it was. A solid hour of weaving through decades of Aldrich's life in song and story without breaking a sweat or missing a beat. The most

affecting drama at Fringe.

Ryan Vincent Anderson as Ira Aldridge (Photo by Grettel Cortes)



6. *Lady Into Fox*, *Why Water Falls*, and *Pocket Universe*

A banner year for dramas at Fringe, I wish for wider audiences to discover the thrills of *Lady Into Fox* (about a wife who mysteriously transforms into a fox and the loving husband left behind), or Leigh Curran's stirring one woman dramedy about motherhood and fiction writing, *Why Water Falls*. Perhaps the most affecting love story at Fringe was the heartbreaking *Pocket Universe*, a haunting hybrid of *Rabbit Hole*, and *The Twilight Zone*. The audience around me weeped and gasped through the chilling twists (beautifully performed by Rick Marcus and Nan McNamara). Kudos to playwright Thomas Brandon and Director Rhonda Kohl.

Nan McNamara and Rick Marcus in *Pocket Universe* (photo by Lindsay Schnebly)



7. The Hamlet-Mobile

And then there's the Hamlet-Mobile. To be seen to be believed, the Hamlet-Mobile in its previous life was a beat up utility truck, but during Fringe it was rebirthed into a roving caravan of Shakespearean glory. The van traveled the grungy blocks of the Fringe Fest neighborhood magnificently performing scenes (for free) from *Hamlet* on sidewalks. Or (if you were lucky) you could be part of an audience of TWO INSIDE the truck while members of the Hamlet-Mobile acted out select *Hamlet* scenes (the funeral scene, the orgy scene, etc) for you very up close and personal - blood, swords, and all. I am not kidding. The Hamlet-Mobile ensemble took what we thought of as traditional theatre venues and tore it completely apart.

Photo courtesy of the Hamlet-Mobile



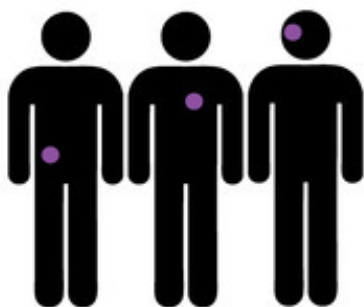
8. *This Is We*

A minimal soulful gem, *This Is We*, was monumental in scope and story. It followed the birth, blitzkrieg upbringing, triumphant success and lonely death of Michael Carter Bronson, a fictional candidate for U.S. president who could also improv rap ala Eminem in *8 Mile*. Directed by Ty Leisher, and starring three talented young actors (Derrick VanDerMillen, Kjai Block and the show's writer Mark Smolyar) who cleverly switched roles depending on the stage of Bronson's life.

THIS IS WE

A ONE MAN SHOW
(WITH THREE MEN)

WRITTEN BY
MARK SMOLYAR



DIRECTED BY
TY LEISHER

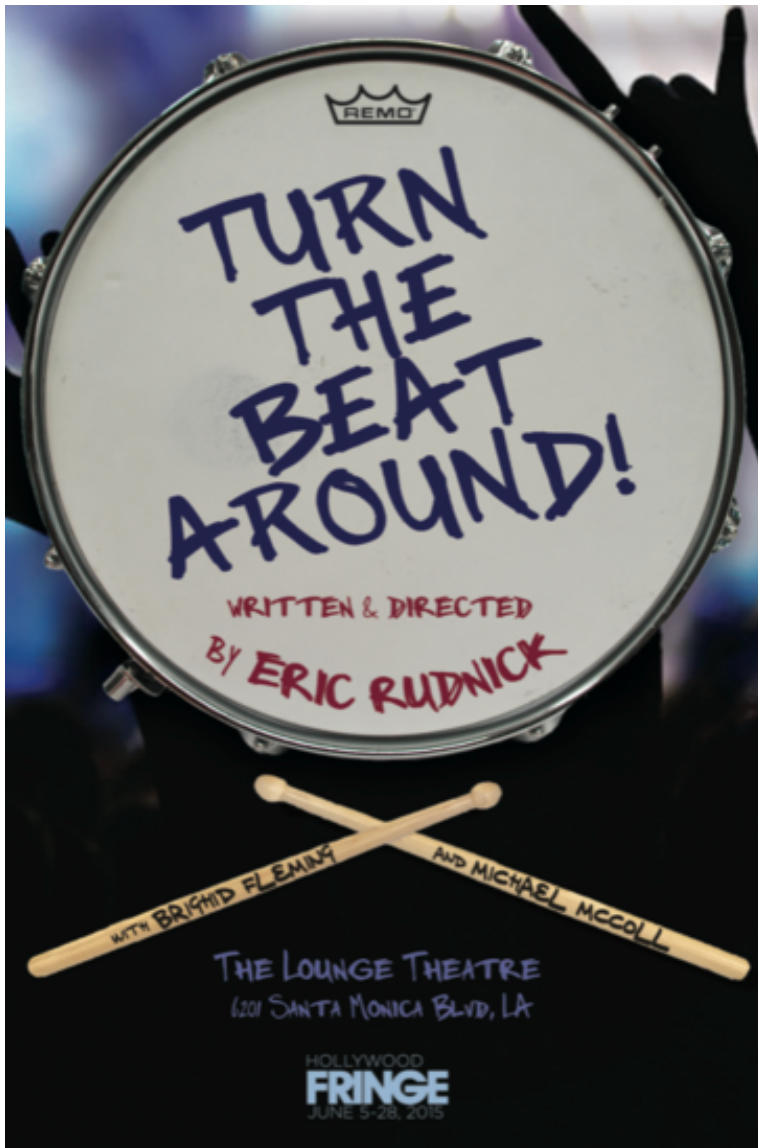
TUESDAY, JUNE 9TH @ 830-930 PM
SUNDAY, JUNE 14TH @ 230-330 PM
FRIDAY, JUNE 19TH @ 1130-1230 PM
SATURDAY, JUNE 20TH @ 230-330 PM
THURSDAY, JUNE 25TH @ 10-11 PM

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FRINGE Theatre Asylum 

9. *Turn The Beat Around*

Anyone who has ever loved drums (and who doesn't?) would find much to cherish in the many lively and layered sketches that comprise *Turn The Beat Around*, playwright Eric Rudnick's ode to his favorite instrument. We meet sex-obsessed heavy metal stars, a college professor and his reluctant drum student, and most amusingly, a futuristic team of scientists trying to decipher what a drum's purpose was for mankind. Michael Weissman of the pop-punk band Reason 837 provided stellar drumming between each fabulous scene - which was worth the price of admission alone.



10. Laura House, Susan Tierney, *Timeheart*, *Zip Ties* and so much more!

I can't believe I am at #10 already - there are too many great shows I don't have room to mention - the otherworldly comedy improv musical, *Timeheart*, a fan-favorite attested by the long audience lines at midnight down dark Hollywood sidewalks. *Zip Ties'* testosterone-fueled crime-comedy was a madcap, blood-drenched, paranoid Tarantino-esque wild ride. Susan Tierney's brave and stirring one woman show at the Complex Theatre rocked. And Thank God I caught Laura House's *How To Hate Yourself* on the last day of Fringe - a riotous laughfest and a complete joy. I learned I don't hate myself and I love Laura House even more!

Fringe 2015 has just ended but check out the site for any updates -

<http://www.hollywoodfringe.org/>

Some shows will have extended runs - many of these shows have their own Facebook pages so check them out if you can. I am already looking forward to Fringe 2016! Hope to see you THERE!

Zip Ties poster by Annie Rooney, Photo by Kyle Geller

