

Gay & Lesbian

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Fringe Fest reality shows

Truth serum courses through many of this year's queer offerings.
By Beth Greenfield

Where there are fringes, there are gays—and the annual Fringe Festival, 17 days of experimental, edgy and sometimes just plain weird theater, is certainly no exception. “I think artists that push boundaries in every possible direction—sexually, politically, with regards to human rights—are attracted to a fringe festival,” says Elena K. Holy, cofounder and artistic director of the NYC fest, now in its 14th year. “We’re one of the least expensive and most accessible ways to put your work on its feet.”

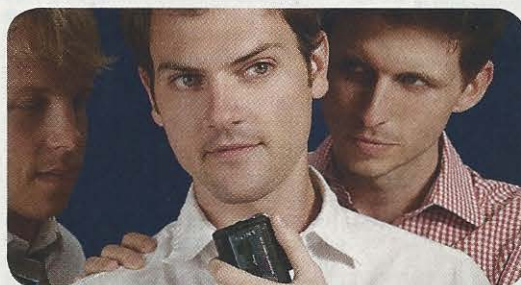
This year, nearly 50 shows have some sort of queer angle, be it a straight-up story of lesbian romance (*Jen and Liz in Love*), a twisting tale of faith and sexuality (*The Mission*) or a campy, glittery showcase (*Friends of Dorothy: An Oz Cabaret*). Look a little deeper, though, and you’ll find an unmistakable trend: Playwrights are preoccupied with true stories. Some such tales are contemporary—such as the *Ah Kua Show*, with Singapore’s Leona Lo starring in three transwomen’s narratives, including her own; *Missionary Position*, based on the experiences of writer Steven Fales (last seen in his *Confessions of a Mormon Boy*), who was a missionary in Portugal; and *Viva La Evolucion!*, about Diana Yanez’s coming of age as a queer Cuban girl in Miami. Others keep an eye on history, looking back at the gay past à la *The Temperamentals* and the recent revival of *Boys in the Band*.

“Current news and politics can become an avalanche of sound bites and statistics, competing for attention. There’s a stillness, a quiet in looking at the past, which makes it easier to find the human stories—stories shaped by their endings,” notes New Yorker Stanley Richardson, whose play *Veritas* revisits the 1920 “Secret Court” of Harvard. This five-man committee set out on a ruthless search for gay students after an undergrad’s suicide revealed a thriving queer subculture



AH KUA SHOW
Leona Lo, notorious in Singapore, portrays herself and two other transwomen in the play she wrote.

VERITAS
Gay Harvard students are ferreted out and punished in Stanley Richardson’s new work.



OPEN HEART
Three is never a crowd according to the real men quoted in Joe Salvatore’s play.

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY WAY
Actors portray actors on a mission to entrap homosexuals in 1914 in Tom Jacobson’s drama.



at the university. It found 14 men “guilty,” forcing them out of school and forever altering the course of their lives.

“The events themselves—and the very fact that this witch hunt could happen at Harvard, the elite incubator of rational thought—were shocking,” says Richardson, who learned of the story through a small mention in *Out* magazine several years ago. “But I was more disturbed by the fact that Harvard had not meaningfully addressed these issues. I became obsessed with honoring these guys—giving them a proper burial of sorts.”

Other Fringe Fest fare that relies on history for its drama includes *Dear Harvey*, by Patricia Loughrey, which adds texture to the public fascination with Harvey Milk by employing memories of the slain activist that are based on interviews with Cleve Jones, Anne Kronenberg and his nephew, Stuart Milk. There’s also *The Twentieth-Century Way*, by Tom Jacobson, based on the model of hiring a pair of actors to entrap homosexuals, which was a method created by police in Long Beach, California, in 1914.

“On top of the story’s inherent theatricality and relevance, it’s also

an important piece of gay history, which is largely unknown,” says the plays’s director, Michael Michetti. Jacobson, who learned about these events in the book *Gay L.A.*, by Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, has created a dramatic retelling that has just two actors playing all of the roles. “This inventive take on the material not only makes for dazzling entertainment, but opens up the play to explore much larger questions of identity, and the kinds of roles we all play in our daily lives,” Michetti adds.

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Finally, there’s *Open Heart*, a show that found its inspiration in the past but tells present-day stories. When playwright Joe Salvatore was researching his 2008 Fringe Fest production, *III*—about the long-term three-way relationship among photographer George Platt Lynes, writer Glenway Wescott and MoMA curator Monroe Wheeler—he started to wonder about the frequency of such romances today. At the same time, Salvatore became single and began dating, and kept meeting men who were in long-term “open” relationships.

“I was intrigued,” he recalls. “These few initial stories prompted me to begin exploring the idea of creating a piece where the voices of men would provide insight for an alternative to the heteronormative, monogamous structures that many gay men are living in or believe they have to live in.”

He found and interviewed 13 such couples, was struck by his subjects’ candor and learned, among other nuances, that some relationships start open and others open up over time. The material was also surprisingly honest and articulate. “One thing I always find in verbatim-theater work that I create is that people will speak more metaphorically than I could ever construct through a more traditional playwriting process,” Salvatore says. “I am still struck by the authenticity that people convey through these moments of poetry that just spill out of them.”

The New York International Fringe Festival is Fri 13–Aug 29. See It’s Here, It’s Queer, and visit fringenyc.org.