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David Cuthbert The Times-Picayune

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- The Arts Home
- Festivals Home
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- DramaRama 16 postponed until June at CAC
- First N.O. theater Fringe Festival attracts 4,400
- Are you Romeo, Juliet, Bernardo or Anita?
- 'The Frogs' at Delgado: joking while croaking
- Our town: Taking the temperature of New Orleans, Le Chat Noir festival offers 10 views of the crazily courageous way we live now

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- Backstage (RSS)
- Books (RSS)
- Breaking News (RSS)
- Cover story (RSS)
- Extras (RSS)
- Festivals (RSS)
- Hither and Yon (RSS)
- Interview (RSS)
- Last Chance (RSS)
- Living: Arts and Entertainment (RSS)
- News Item (RSS)
- Overheard (RSS)
- Preview (RSS)
- Review (RSS)
- Rumor Mill (RSS)
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- Theater Guy (RSS)
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First N.O. theater Fringe Festival attracts 4,400

Posted by [David Cuthbert](#), Theater writer, The Times-Picayune November 20, 2008 4:05AM

Categories: [Festivals](#)

Does New Orleans want or need a [Fringe Festival](#)?

Judging by attendance and the enthusiasm of audiences at the more than 40 attractions and 100 performances of the first **New Orleans Fringe Festival**, in the French Quarter, Marigny and Bywater, the answer would seem to be "yes!"

The four-day attendance was estimated to be 4,400, "which exceeded our wildest expectations," said Kristen Evans, the festival's executive director.

"The biggest problem we had was that a lot of shows sold out and people weren't able to get into this venue or that," she said. "But since every show had several performances, we hope everyone got to see what they wanted."

"It was amazing!" said Dennis Monn, the fest's creator and artistic director. "I visited every venue about 50 times and by Sunday, I was a very tired, but very happy man."

The most popular attractions at the festival, Evans said, were **"The Lunatic King,"** the **"Danny the Diver"** and **"Luna"** puppet shows, **"Sex Crimes Cabaret,"** **"Fight!"** and **"Stripped! Naked in a New World."**

There were full houses at the shows I was able to visit. And just by chance, I happened to see some powerful, funny shows written and performed by women.

The most impressive was the home-grown **"Stripped! Naked in a New World,"** a triptych of three monologues. The curtain-raiser was "Donde Esta," **Jennifer Pagan's** entertainingly intense Chilean mama Dolores, undressing after a hard day's work and talking to a statue of the Madonna, who is given a veil that was one of Dolores' stockings. Dolores is a cousin of Tennessee Williams' Serafina Della Rose in "The Rose Tattoo," talking of the glories and torments of past love while she hopes to God her daughter's behaving herself. "If she's anything like me..." Delores says fearfully, crossing herself.

Diana Shortes had the closing spot, reprising her **"The Baroness, Undressed,"** as the Baroness Pontalba, who gets laboriously, comically dressed and then leisurely disrobes as she metaphorically throws off the shackles of male oppression. The riveting account of the baroness being shot by her greedy father-in-law is now almost an operatic aria, stylized and startling in its impact.

The central story of "Stripped!" was "Angry Hair," **Francine Segal's** account of growing up a Sephardic Jew in New Orleans. It was a fascinating, detailed description of what it is to be a young Jewish woman of Syrian descent in the South, in which Segal played herself and a gallery of characters, from her memorable father to the designer Isaac Mizrahi. It's the universal story of feminine search for approval in a male-dominated society and in Segal's hands, everything is happening anew to her as she relates it. She makes it very immediate for the audience in her descriptions of food, customs, her expertise at spotting shoplifters in her father's store, the arranged marriages she rejected and the cry of her youthful life, "I want to go to college and become an actress!"

That she succeeded and continues to grow in her craft is made abundantly clear



"Stripped! Naked in a New World" starred, from left, Diana Shortes, Francine Segal and Jennifer Pagan at the New Orleans Fringe Festival.



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by her piece, which is funny and immensely touching. It's a very alive and aware theater experience.

Segal's focus and ease onstage was such that a woman's repeatedly ringing cell phone didn't throw her, she just incorporated it into the act. (I actually feared for the woman's life, but have never seen a performer handle an annoying interruption with such cool.)

Her "Stripped!" colleague Pagan also had a full-length monologue, "**The Shoebox Lounge**," equally ambitious in the territory it takes in, which includes her love life, grandparents' drinking habits passed down to her, a rape, Hurricane Katrina and total recall of every pair of shoes she's ever owned. Like Segal's monologue, it could stand some trimming and condensing, but again, you feel the writer-actress has exposed herself totally and you are somewhat awed by the candor. The central metaphor of shoeboxes and closets as places where we hide things is sound. And you hope she takes to heart the observation of shoe repairman Mr. Smitty: "If you love yourself as much as you love your shoes, you gonna be all right."

I had the most fun at New Yorker Gabrielle Penabaz's multimedia "**Sex Crimes Cabaret**," in which she asks, "Are you, or could you be a sex criminal?" The answer is possibly, or even probably, "Yes!" thanks to the screwed-up laws on various states' books, born of hysteria and repression.

Penabaz cuts a dangerously fetching figure in her demi-dominatrix get-ups, singing songs such as "Secret Special Toy Surprise" and "Vampire Geisha to Go," flaunting a skirt of many condoms, an amazing array of nutty sexual news reports and firsthand reportage of sex workers' lives.

She was assisted by Nicole Blackman, costumed as a police officer of arresting appeal.

"Sex Crimes Cabaret" was a wild ride; an enjoyable, stimulating, even thoughtful grab bag of audacious elements, as informative as it was daring. For instance, this was the first time I'd seen an anatomically correct male blowup doll. I mean, who knew?

Kat Johnston's full-frontal nudity was one of the more striking things about "**Galveston**," a strange curio of a play by Michael Swift, which came to New Orleans via the Family Tree Collective of New York and New Orleanian Jeffrey Glaser, who directed and acted in the serio-comic endeavor, along with the playwright. Clearly a work-in-progress, it's a quixotic story about a lively old hermit living on a sandbar shack with a 15-year-old boy who isn't sure who his father is, the mayor who has it in for the old guy and the mayor's sexually available wife, who spends most of the play naked in a bathtub.

In its present form, basic questions of believability must be dealt with, including an approaching hurricane whose winds are heard for some time, but which is not mentioned until the very end of the one-act, when its floodwaters suddenly arrive. Age-appropriate actors would help future stagings, as would a more oblique approach to the story, which does not work as quasi-realistic theater. And isn't "Galveston" a rather sweeping title for what is essentially a very small slice of eccentric life?

But then, this is why we have Fringe Festivals.

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