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Lecture rap, ice skating and other pleasant surprises at Fringe Festival

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San Francisco Chronicle

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[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)


Ice-skating at the San Francisco Fringe Festival? Well, yes -- of a sort. Nor is that the biggest surprise in the 13th annual Fringe Festival. Some of the highlights in the seven shows I saw Sunday at the Fringe included a panel discussion, a live silent movie and an academic dissertation inaugurating the new genre of lecture rap.

Expecting the unexpected is basic to fringing in this town. S.F. Fringe founders Christina Augello and Richard Livingston adhere to the non-juried principle of international fringing, allotting space by luck of the draw to the 44 companies (the 45th, from Florida, had to withdraw at the last minute) in 10 venues this year. Nobody, Augello and Livingston included, knows quite what to expect until the shows open.

Experienced fringers check the audience reviews on the festival's Web site and pay attention to the buzz in the cafe and hallway at the Exit Theatre -- Fringe Central -- as performers tote sets and costumes in or out between the crowds lined up for the next shows. In a potluck smorgasbord such as this, some dishes will almost always be less well prepared than others. This year, though, my day on the Fringe consisted of one pleasant surprise after another.

It was a day dominated by hourlong solo shows, only two of which turned out to be autobiographical. Ed Holmes' "Subhuman: True Tales From Beneath the Sea," at Exit

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Stage Left, is the most traditional such show, despite his clever use of submarine videos and toy ships. It's the story of his years on submarines in the U.S. Navy -- told with the wry, irreverent humor one expects from this mainstay of the San Francisco Mime Troupe and founder of the annual April 1 St. Stupid's Day Parade.

It's a piece that doesn't seem finished yet, but Holmes has a fascinating tale to tell, full of curious and unsavory details of Navy life. And any hour with this master comic is bound to be time well spent (final showing tonight).

Joani Rose's "Under the Counter Culture," at the Exit's main stage, is a less traditional autobiographical monologue. For one thing, it's a cabaret. For another, Rose is working with accompaniment from superb country fiddler Jessie Modic and guitarist Jeanne York. The life story is interspersed between Rose's eight original and beguiling songs.

Songs and narrative tell the story of how a Midwestern Catholic girl ended up a Humboldt County hippie communitarian, single mom and sometime pot farmer. Rose is an engaging narrator, sweet singer and gently satiric songwriter. She's delightful on aspects of aging ("Menopause," "Cholesterol"), and particularly acute on the gaps between good intentions and reality ("The Tea Bag Song," "Our Sons").

More offbeat is "The Rap Canterbury Tales" from Vancouver at Exit on Taylor. Created and performed by tall, boyish Baba Brinkman, it is -- as its title promises -- three tales and some of the prologue from Chaucer's 14th century masterpiece, retold in rap. The stories are great -- including the graphically bawdy "Miller's Tale" and the buoyantly feminist "Wife of Bath's Tale" -- and Brinkman tells them pretty well. Where he excels, though, is in his "lecture rap" on thousands of years of oral poetry, and an invigorating encore that combines hip-hop with ancient Anglo Saxon verse forms.

Sabrina Stevenson's "Flower Murderer," at the same venue, is another collection of tales -- 14 vignettes, each as sharply

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performed as it is crisply written. Some are character studies: A lovely pretentious poet, a woman obsessed to the point of stalking, a hilarious response to a bothersome roommate. Most are concerned with male-female relationships, from comic looks at men who can't deal with female sexuality to tough depictions of spousal and child abuse. Stevenson, lead singer-songwriter with the Los Angeles art punk band Third Grade Teacher, is a mesmerizing performer, nicely showcased by director Karen Aschenbach.

Diana Galligan of Toronto is another captivating actor-writer, though her show -- "Viva Vivi!" (Silent Pepper Productions) at Stage Left -- is more of a silent movie. Which is appropriate, since it's the story of a silent film star's career falling apart with the advent of talkies. Staged in sharp, quick scenes by Victoria Goring, and performed -- mostly in silence -- with broad early-cinema gestures and Galligan's irresistibly expressive eyes, it's poignant, comic and engaging.

Far less straightforward, and the most exciting of the shows I saw, is "The Young War" at the Exit by Jason Craig of the ever-intriguing Banana, Bag and Bodice. Staged as a panel discussion on sex, courtship and relationships - - performed with magnetic understatement by panelists Craig, Jessica Jelliffe, Rod Hipkind and Heather Peroni, interrupted by a charismatic Peter Blomquist -- it's a multifaceted, fragmented, evocative piece that manages to be funny, edgy, affecting and oddly sexy as well.

Oh yes, and the ice skating. That's the climax of "Come Fly With Me Nude, " written and brightly performed by actor-dancers Diane Karagianakos and Todd Pickering (Dombella Productions) at Stage Left. The story of performance poets who become unlikely superstars, it's a show that gets funnier as it goes along. No, there's no nudity -- or ice, for that matter. But that skating scene has to be seen to be believed.

San Francisco Fringe Festival: 44 shows run in repertory in 10 venues through

Sunday. All 30 shows at the Exit Theatreplex ? the three Exit Theatre stages at 156 Eddy St. and 277 Taylor St. ? run 60 minutes or less. Weekday performances (three shows a night) begin at 7 p.m.; Saturday?s shows begin at 1 p.m. and Sunday?s at 11:30 a.m. Tickets \$5-\$8. Call (415) 673-3847 or visit www.sffringe.org.

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Page E - 1

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