

# Fringe No More: How a DIY festival grew into Edmonton's biggest draw

## Writer Myrna Kostach celebrates Alberta's entrepreneurial spirit in her first column

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by Myrna Kostach

Once upon a time, Edmonton's Old Strathcona neighbourhood was a cheap place to live. I know that because I moved into a housing co-op in 1984, along with other writers, artists and actors. It should come as no surprise then that when, in 1985, at an early version of the Fringe, one of our neighbours, the playwright and actor Ken Brown, premiered a new play called *Life After Hockey*, we all decided to troop over to an emptied-out space in a strip mall off Whyte Avenue (it was the 1980s economic bust after the 1970s boom) to cheer him on. Cement floor. DIY lighting. Portable bleachers. A sweating, ecstatic Ken Brown taking his curtain call from a bunch of hippies.

Little did we know.

The Fringe was the brainchild of theatre director Brian Paisley, who went to the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1981 and came back fired up with the idea of presenting a version of the event in Edmonton. In 1982, there were 200 performances in five venues. It was a leap in the dark. No market research existed to show there was an audience in Edmonton for summertime theatre – Northern Light Theatre had decided against a Shakespeare Festival – and it was perennially difficult for theatre artists to find work in the theatre off-season. What the Fringe Theatre Event, as it was first called, proved was that, in the arts at least, sometimes you have to take a chance. You give the public what it doesn't even know it wants and then wait for the audiences to start lining up. As it turned out, they did just that – eventually by the thousands. In the beginning, it was all about the buzz. As assistant producer Judy Lawrence was fond of saying: "If you build it, they will come."

*Life After Hockey* went on to bigger and better things, and so did the festival itself. By 1996, Fringe Theatre Adventures launched a fundraising goal of \$110,000; in 2000, it announced an ambitious \$8.2-million fundraising campaign.

Back in 1985, we didn't see any of this coming. Those were the days of lining up at individual venues (all eight to 10 of them), of following the buzz around the site and taking your chances of getting in, of craftily organizing the plays you selected so you could see absolutely everything

you wanted to see, and of the sense that you, wily Fringer, were part of an alternative universe where “the play’s the thing,” not the money or the glamour or the groupies (such as they were). This was part of another Edmonton, across the river from the legislature, city hall, the Citadel and the banks.

This, at least, was the view from the audience. But from the perspective of the Fringe organizers, the event always had a more clearly defined entrepreneurial purpose. Would-be event participants paid an application fee for the chance to have their productions selected by a non-juried, ultra-democratic lottery. After they’d paid for their own productions costs, the only revenue that artists walked home with came from ticket sales – no subsidies! So they were entirely responsible for their own hit or flop (and in total control of the artistic content of their productions), while at the same time benefitting from the festival’s ticketing services, rented space and general hoopla and hype.

Speaking of the tickets: as early as 1988, this “alternative universe” of theatre was selling festival seats in advance, and now does so online. In 1994, the Fringe successfully presented a business plan to the city for a \$1-a-year lease of half of the city-owned Old Strathcona Bus Barns, which evolved, after a great deal of fundraising, into today’s state-of-the-art Arts Barns. Also evolving from one Fringe to the next: outdoor stages (pass the hat!), vendors (who pay for the privilege), beer tents, logos, donor and sponsor benefits, and green sustainability: the 2011 festival featured 10 carnival rides run on vegetable oil.

So, come one, come all. Somewhere there is still an empty space in a strip mall, waiting for the next act.