

My life on theater's Fringe

Contributed by asap
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Why is JEFF BAENEN putting on a play? Baenen asks himself that question, and shares his experiences writing and directing a show at the Minnesota Fringe Festival.

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Let the show begin. Jeff Baenen holding a framed show poster signed by cast and crew.

I'm not the theatrical type. The last time I set foot on a stage was more than 30 years ago, when I pranced and sang as a townsman in a college production of "The Music Man."

So what was I thinking when I decided to enter the Minnesota Fringe Festival, an 11-day potpourri of spoken word, dance, stand-up, musicals and children's shows?

Good question. I'm still wondering myself.

The 13th annual Minnesota Fringe drew 44,692 people to 867 performances at 23 venues in Minneapolis. Some of them even saw the five performances of my show — "Bud 'n' Wally: A True (Love) Story."

I had the idea for a two-man show a few years ago after reading that Marlon Brando, star of "A Streetcar Named Desire," "On the Waterfront" and "The Godfather," was pals with Wally Cox, the mousy comedian who was the voice of TV's cartoon superhero "Underdog." After Cox's sudden death in 1973, Brando — "Bud" to his friends and family — kept his ashes for more than three decades, then had them scattered with his own ashes in Death Valley in 2004.

What a great story! The Wild One meets the Mild One! And what a chance for an actor to strut his stuff as a big-screen icon.

How could it miss?

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I had just a title and a concept when I entered the Fringe lottery — a system started last year to narrow a crowded field to 163 companies. I had to skip the ping-pong ball drawing -- my son had a Cub Scouts banquet — but I rushed home to discover online that my name had been drawn.

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Bud.

Then came the hard part. I had no script, no actors, no experience. At first I was going to play Wally, but after realizing I looked nothing like the wry, mustachioed former "Hollywood Squares" star, I decided to get a real actor.

I advertised at <http://www.tctheatreandfilm.org> and in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, but drew only a few hopefuls. One turned me down flat — he didn't want to be in a Fringe show that hadn't been written yet.

Undaunted, I held auditions. The format was predictable: quick introductions, a reading from a scene chosen by the actor, a cold reading from a play I selected at random, then a reading of the opening scene of "Bud 'n' Wally," with me playing Bud or Wally.

Ultimately I chose Tharen E. Callanan, a talented 22-year-old drama student to play Brando. The brawny National Guardsman nailed Brando's real-life lisp and intensity. The Equity actor I chose for Wally dropped out for a real job, so I quickly recast and chose Matthew Leviton, who's been alive for as long as Cox has been dead.

Leviton had the edge in auditions — he already had a mustache.

I enlisted a friend, Paul Kolar, to compose music and hired Annie Wallick (she's on IMDb -- look her up) as stage manager. We landed Theatre de la Jeune Lune, last year's Tony Award recipient for regional theater, as our venue. The old cold-storage building in the Warehouse District has an industrial look but an elegant lobby. We were using the 99 seat second stage.

The Fringe runs on a tight schedule: 10 minutes to set up, 50 minutes to perform, 10 minutes to say thanks and clear out. Our props were simple: bongos, a folding chair, a fake Oscar and a wooden box to hold Wally's ashes.

I started bashing out a script. The words came easily — I just started typing. The biggest problem: After decades of writing in terse AP style, my dialogue was too clipped. The original script clocked in at only 20 minutes — I needed at least another 25, or the audience would feel cheated.

The set-up was the 80-year-old Brando dying in his hospital room, being confronted about his wasted life by Wally's ghost. Wally returns Brando to the vitality of his leather-jacketed "Wild One" days.

Like any good reporter, I did my research, reading Brando's memoir, "Songs My Mother Taught Me," and Peter Manso's massive "Brando: The Biography," both from 1994. The Internet also has a trove of Brando and Cox stories that lent themselves to good scenes.

We rehearsed over the summer in a sweltering church. My wife, Laura, a former AP staffer-turned-freight railroad publicist, took publicity photos and helped me write a press release. I blanketed coffeehouses, theaters and bookstores with postcards and posters, and did interviews with three radio stations, my local weekly and an alumni publication at my alma mater, Minnesota State University Moorhead.

It was refreshing to be on the other side of a microphone for a change. But I could see how interviewees quickly tire of answering the same questions.

On Saturday, Aug. 5, at 2:30 p.m. we hit the stage. I walked in and was amazed to see the stalls nearly two-thirds full. All the promotion had paid off!

I was thrilled but nervous. I sat high up, covering my face and watching my play through my fingers. In the opening scene Tharen set Wally's box of ashes on a small table, and the table collapsed. My actors had to step around the debris for the rest of the play, but it worked.

They got a strong round of applause, and I bounded down the stairs and wept on stage while thanking everyone at curtain call. It was overpowering to see something I had created come to life. Afterward, I signed my first autographs. I didn't know what to write, except, "Thanks for coming."

The following Tuesday, our second performance was about 60 percent full, thanks to a contingent of AP staffers, neighbors and my parents and relatives.

Then the bottom fell out. We got some harsh online reviews — "Baenen's directing is amateur at best," one read — and a mixed review from one of the two dailies. At least we escaped with a "Worth Considering" grade instead of the dreaded "Avoid Like the Plague" label. (The reviewer said in the paper's Fringe blog that she upped my grade because I had cried on stage.)

"Bud 'n' Wally" didn't generate the buzz needed for a successful Fringe show. Without good word-of-mouth, our attendance dropped — to one-third capacity at our third performance, and one-quarter at our fourth.

But my actors rallied for a strong finish on closing night, recovering to one-third capacity and earning a standing ovation.

I got a 65 percent cut of the gate, but after paying my cast and crew, printing costs, and the Fringe application fee, I ended up in the hole. (My dad, the CPA, assures me I can write it off as business expenses.)

Would I do it again?

Well, it's now two months until next year's Fringe applications are available. Let's see -- what should I do this time ...

SEE IT ONLINE:

Jeff Baenen's site: <http://www.jeffbaenen.com>

Fringe Festival: <http://www.fringefestival.org>

Jeff Baenen is the Minnesota broadcast editor and covers entertainment for the AP. Given the choice of "to be" or "not to be," he chooses "to be."