

Theatre

Preview

Fringe benefits

The *Time Out* Critics' Choice season returns.

What exactly does the word 'Fringe' conjure up for you? Pub function rooms transformed into tiny, grimy theatres, smelling of beer, showing one-man shows where you and your friend are the only people in the audience? Or cutting-edge, exciting theatre, free of the censorship of the bureaucrats at the major theatre companies and produced by people who care more about art than they do about making money? This week *Time Out* and BAC have got together to celebrate the best of the Fringe with a season of four productions which featured in *Time Out*'s Critics' Choice on their original showing. *Oddbodies* kicks off with its exuberant, physical version of 'Richard III', Paul Sellar's thrilling 'The Bedsit' (pictured) follows with James Ellis; Nick Green's macabre 'Her Alabaster Skin' is next; and the season concludes with 'Half Moon', a fascinating study of '40s bohemia by Jack Shepherd, produced by Mehmet Ergen.

The essence of putting on a Fringe show is that there is control but no money. It's no longer a cheap option. If the venue is in a pub, the landlord will charge a rent to the overall administrator, who will then charge over and above that to the visiting companies. Some administrators blatantly demand as much as they can get away with in order to fund their own productions. The amount can range from £500 per week to £2,500. Have a success, like the companies above, and the venue will be keen for a return visit: the rent may drop, a contribution possibly made towards production costs, and a box-office split even offered. Let's not get too carried away, however. None of the company members featuring in the season were paid a wage during their initial run and

nor will they be at BAC. All they can hope to do is cover their expenses and, in the best of all possible worlds, get a share of the box office once all other expenses have been paid. It's not for nothing that the dole is often claimed to be the biggest supporter of the Arts.

So why do people do it? Why is it that the unpaid Fringe often finds it easier to attract calibre actors than Derby Playhouse or Bury St Edmunds? The main reason has to be that the influential people – agents, artistic directors, television producers and casting directors – all live in London.

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The irony is that the company is often working so hard, trying to rehearse, make the set, do the publicity and all the administration, that it never has time to write the essential letters and just vaguely hopes that the right people will turn up of their own accord. Some hope.

If the Fringe is to have any artistic interest outside the profession, however, it has to be more than just a showcase. Mehmet Ergen, until recently artistic director of the Southwark Playhouse (see *Cues*), says that 90 per cent of the directors who ring him want to do Chekhov or Shakespeare so that they can say at their RSC interviews for assistant directorships that they have some experience of the classics. That's certainly not been Ergen's interest at Southwark, where his enormous energy and commitment to unearthing interesting scripts, as well as his assistance in putting together a



company for those who bring their projects to him, are some of the reasons why Southwark has been such a bright spark on the theatrical map for the last five years.

For playwrights Nick Green and Paul Sellar (who already had a commission from the National Theatre before 'The Bedsit' opened), the initial attraction

of putting their plays on themselves was the artistic freedom that it offered. It is striking, however, that in spite of their proven ability to put on quality work, both

Oddbodies and Green are wondering what happens now. *Oddbodies* has been touring for the last three years, both in Britain and abroad, but has yet to be properly subsidised. *Oddbodies* performer Tanya Scott Wilson was writing to agents on her own behalf when I rang. She summed up the company's feelings: 'We are feeling quite demoralised at the moment, wondering how to go forward. There's only so much you can do without support.' So far Green has yet to persuade a literary agent to come and see his work. Undoubtedly there is a lot of rubbish on the Fringe, as we at *Time Out* know only too well, but there are also people doing good work who need help if they are not to give up altogether. That is, I hope, where the *Time Out* Critics' Choice season comes in. *Jane Edwards*
Time Out Critics' Choice season runs at the BAC from May 18. See *Off-West* End listings for details.

'Aunt Dan and Lemon'

Almeida (O-WE)

There's a moment in Wallace Shawn's uncomfortable play when Aunt Dan is passionately advocating the virtues of Henry Kissinger (responsible for the bombing of North Vietnam and, more recently, the squat toad looking down Princess Diana's dress in a famous photograph). In response, Janine Duvitski as the well-educated Mother has *nothing* to say

