

Fringe Benefits

by Jonathan Mandell

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"They say you can't make a living in the theater, but you can make a killing," a man in a fedora and trench coat was saying on the stage, accompanied by a jazzy saxophonist. "What do actors say before the curtain goes up? 'Break a leg.' But if they're going to tell it straight, what they ought to say is 'break your neck,' 'break the bank,' 'break your heart.'"

It was the opening scene of a new musical called "It's A Hit," a combination murder mystery, back-stage musical and insider spoof that was one of the shows in the tenth annual [New York International Fringe Festival](#) this month.

The actor playing the character might as well have been speaking from personal experience. "There are a lot of problems being an artist in New York City," says Donald Corren, a veteran of Broadway who says he still struggles from month to month.

The idea of a fringe festival is not unique to New York. There are [more than 50 explicitly-named "fringe festivals"](#) around the world, all inspired by the largest and oldest one in [Edinburgh, Scotland](#), which has been around since 1947. The fringe festivals are based on the idea of giving any performer and any production, no matter how untested or unconnected (or how bad?) an opportunity for an audience. This month's festival in Edinburgh promised 1,867 shows in 261 venues. By contrast, New York's fringe festival only promised 216 shows performing in 22 venues.

But New York's is different in several ways. For one, not just anything is allowed on stage "the 216 productions this year were selected out of some 1,000 applicants. And then, thanks to the success of some shows that began at New York's fringe then moved to the big-time " most notably Urinetown: The Musical, which became a hit on Broadway five years ago and won three Tony Awards, but also such Off-Broadway favorites as "Matt & Ben," "Dog Sees God" and "Debbie Does Dallas" "the fringe has gained a reputation in some quarters as a [relatively inexpensive way for polished pros](#) to get noticed by commercial producers.

Checking the cast biographies of some of the fringe shows show the performers to be anything

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but on the fringe. In the six-member cast of “It’s A Hit,” for example — put together by the same team that had put on “Joy of Sex” at the fringe, which moved Off-Broadway — four performers have appeared in Broadway shows, (including Joanna Glushak, whose more than a dozen Broadway credits range from “Hairspray” to “Fiddler on the Roof” to “Sweet Smell of Success”). Two list appearances in one of the “Law and Order” TV shows, which seems to serve as a kind of WPA employment project for New York theater actors.

And yet, “all of us are struggling to make ends meet,” says [Donald Corren](#) , who was on Broadway just last year in the two-character show

[Souvenir](#)

. “We closed that show in the beginning of January. I’ve been the Callback King for the last seven months. This fringe show is the first show I’ve done since Souvenir.

“Only a minority of the thousands who come here to be performing artists make a living at it,” Corren says. “Making a living is dictated by what things cost around you, and New York is very expensive.”

If, for many people, talk of “performing artists” conjures up images of, say, Jodie Foster at the Oscars (or, more locally, Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick at the Tony’s), there are of course only a handful of stars. Most artists are “independent workers,” according to Sara Horowitz, the executive director of the [Freelancers Union](#) . And whether they call themselves freelance, self-employed, part-time, temps or simply artists, they are at a disadvantage compared with those New Yorkers whose career aspirations provide them with more traditional employment.

According to Freelancers Union reports [this year](#) and [last year](#) , artists — though highly educated -- suffer from erratic employment, low income, and a lack of benefits.

Horowitz pinpoints three problems facing artists and other independent workers in New York:

1. Lack of Health Care

“Without access to health insurance through an employer, creative workers face steep premiums on the individual market,” Horowitz says. “The average price for an HMO plan in New

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York City is over \$600 a month — far more than someone with limited and erratic income can afford.”

Francisco Solorzano, an actor in his mid-twenties who is in the cast of another fringe festival show, “Here.This.Now!”, used to have health insurance. That is when he worked on the staff of an employment agency. (“Most everybody who worked there were artists, mostly actors,” he recalls. “That kind of employment offers flexibility.”) But he lost his insurance when he was laid off after September 11th. Now, he finds work when he can as a waiter, and pays the full amount of whatever health care he needs. “I try to go to a dental school because you get a discount if you let the students work on you.” According to a Freelancer Union survey, almost three-quarters of freelancers who were uninsured simply avoided seeking medical care at all.

2. Inadequate Retirement Plans

Working artists are at a disadvantage in two ways, Horowitz says: “They’re left out of simple, subsidized employer plans, and their erratic income means they often can’t consistently add to their own savings accounts.” There are plans for self-employed workers, but they are “complex and confusing. A professional financial advisor would be helpful, but is rarely affordable.”

That is why Horowitz found that more than half of creative workers in last year’s survey did not save for retirement each month, and 28 percent had no retirement savings whatsoever.

3. Tax Penalties

Traditional employees pay only half the taxes due on their social security, with the other half contributed by their employer. But artists, who do not have regular employers, must pay the full amount, which comes to more than 15 percent of their net income.

Horowitz believes the city government could make a big difference for artists with a few changes — “revising the tax code, making it easier for artists to get health insurance, and supporting professional associations to help workers plan for retirement.” The city government could partner with corporate donors, for example, to start a fund to match artists’ contributions to their retirement accounts.

Unless such steps are taken, Horowitz fears, artists, already on the fringe, will move out completely, to more welcoming centers.

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Whether or not “It’s A Hit” becomes a hit, Donald Corren is likely to stay in New York. “I could make a living wage elsewhere,” he says. “But it would mean a very long walk to Times Square.”

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