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## Crowds Flock to Eccentric Fringe Theater Festival

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THE REPORTER EDITOR

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ORLANDO | The 17th Annual Orlando International Fringe Theatre Festival was held at two separate locations in the city's Loch Haven Park, and if the crowds that packed both theaters were any indication, the eccentric productions that make up the two-week event are building a bigger and stronger audience every year.

The shows were held at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre and the nearby Orlando Repertory Theatre. I caught shows over the weekend, and then on a Wednesday night. In both instances, the theater halls were jammed with long lines waiting to get into the shows. No surprise there, because with nearly 70 productions to offer, chances are there was something available for all possible tastes and interests. If not, it would have been worth it to go just for the outside food stands and kids activities on the Loch Haven Park lawn. There are always surprises to be had at the Fringe Festival.

Although the festival concluded Sunday, other local theaters like Theatre Downtown and the Footlights Theatre have picked up Fringe shows and have given them a larger audience, so they may be back in the coming weeks. In the meantime, here's another sample of what this year's festival had to offer.

HERE BE DRAGONS

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Daniel, a gay man from Orlando spending a night at a hotel in Texas, goes to bed during a raging thunderstorm. He wakes up on the couch of his old college friends, Tom and Leslie — who live in upstate Michigan. All three are shocked and have no clue how Daniel magically appeared on that couch. But Tom and Leslie, a married couple who are devout Christians, think it may have been a miracle from God, intended to set Daniel on a path toward

a religious awakening — and to reject his sexual orientation. Au contraire, thinks Daniel, who is an atheist.

Written by Stephen J. Miller, 'Here Be Dragons' has an intriguing opening that keeps you guessing; an even bigger surprise is the ending, which wraps everything together in a shrewd and ingenious twist.

The first half works particularly well, like a 1930s screwball comedy, as the characters struggle to cope with this bizarre situation in very different, and funny, ways.

The only problem is that Miller gets bogged down in the middle, as Tom and Leslie try to convince Daniel there's a higher purpose to his sudden emergence, and that it's a signal for him to turn to God. At this point, the show becomes a political debate, and if you've seen a few of those Fox News/CNN segments on the culture wars, there's nothing new here.

Miller also stacks the deck, making Daniel clever and witty and the Christian couple simple-minded and prudish. There's not much dramatic tension if it isn't a fair fight; although I doubt very many conservative Christians would attend a play like this anyway, so Miller is playing to the base, which — from the heavy applause at the end of the show — was receptive to his message.

Still, Miller's show is aimed at so-called 'ex-gays' who reject their sexual orientation in the pursuit of religion, and with the terrific twist at the play's final moment, I thought he could have done much more with the middle section. As Daniel, David Almeida is a real treat to watch, especially when he has to deal with honest-to-God criticism of his imitation of Cher.

ROBINSON CRUSOE — I'M ALL WASHED UP

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This one-man production is not so much a showcase for fans of the Daniel DeFoe classic as it is an outlet for the talents of Fergus Rougier, who came here from England to debut this witty musical.

Rougier takes us through the saga of the English sailor shipwrecked on an island for several decades, but at just 45 minutes, this is clearly the CliffsNotes version of DeFoe.

That's fine, because the storytelling is less important than Rougier's considerable acting, singing and dancing abilities. Armed with only a blue blanket and an accordion on a blank stage, Rougier is wildly energetic as he sings, performs pantomime and has discussions with his invisible parrot, Polly. He's a lot of fun to watch.

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