



## THEATER

# Gray Tassels Along the Fringe

By LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES AUG. 7, 2014

FOR the past couple of summers, Joan Shepard has packed up her cabaret show and headed for Scotland to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. This summer, she's working much closer to her East Village home.

Her autobiographical "Confessions of Old Lady #2" will be part of the 18th annual New York International Fringe Festival, which begins Friday and continues through Aug. 24, putting about 200 shows on 20 stages in Greenwich Village and on the Lower East Side.

"My daughter, who is kind of a dictator, insisted that I do it," said Ms. Shepard, 81, who began her career at 7 in the Laurence Olivier-Vivien Leigh production of "Romeo and Juliet" on Broadway in 1940 and recently shot an episode of the HBO series "Girls." "She told me that to go back to Scotland was a lateral move."

The festival, informally known as FringeNYC, has a reputation for youth in its artists and audiences. Elena K. Holy, 46, its producing artistic director, often refers to festival artists as "the kids," a habit she attributed partly to a maternal impulse: Many of them are young enough to be her children. But some are old enough to be her parents.

The list includes the veteran actor MacIntyre Dixon, 82, who will take a vacation from "The Fantasticks" Off Broadway to perform the darkly comic title role in "His Majesty, the Devil," a Dostoyevsky-inspired play with music. Alex McFarlane, a visual artist who would give his age only as late 60s, will make his playwriting debut with the political satire "Birds Should Fly Free." The 61-year-old London actress Janet Prince will play three women older than she — Agatha Christie, the actress Margaret Rutherford and Christie's fictional detective Miss Marple — in the solo show "Murder, Margaret and Me," written by Philip Meeks.

Common sense might suggest that artists well ensconced in their careers would look askance at FringeNYC's no-frills, DIY ethic, but that's not always the case. After a well-received run at the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe, Ms. Prince performed Mr. Meeks's play in the West End as part of a 60th-anniversary celebration of the Christie play "The Mousetrap," whose company Ms. Prince also joined for a time. Here, she will act in a Lower East Side art gallery, where, she's been warned, noise from a neighboring nonfestival production may intrude on her performance.

But to Ms. Prince and other longtime grown-ups, the chance to present a show cheaply in New York is a potent lure, even if each production has only 15 minutes to put up its set and 15 minutes to strike it afterward. "Of course, there are restraints, like running up the stairs with the set on your back 15 minutes before you're about to go onstage," Ms. Prince said, then burst into throaty laughter. "I'm being very jolly about it now. Talk to me again in a week's time, and we'll see how excited I am then."

A juried festival, FringeNYC isn't intended to be a platform for big names, and diversity among its participants — including a wide range of ages — is one of its stated aims. "It's not like we haven't had seniors in the festival before, of course," Ms. Holy said. But the quantity of "older-generation artists" caught her eye this year. "It's, I think, maybe part of the maturation of the festival: sort of solidifying our pedigree as an opportunity for artists of all stripes."

Mr. Dixon has had a steady acting career since 1960, when a rave from Arthur Gelb in *The New York Times* propelled him from the post-beatnik coffeehouse scene in Greenwich Village to decades of Broadway, film and television work. But it has been an eclectic livelihood. His wife, Alexandra Devon, wrote "His Majesty, the Devil" when the couple were running a lunchtime theater in Midtown, where they first staged the play in 1969.

Its dialogue belongs mainly to the Devil, and he has a great deal to say. Mr. Dixon, who originated the role and played it again in 1982 — opposite Jamey Sheridan, later known for "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" — said it's rare but doable at his age to learn such a large part. "If one keeps acting regularly, your memory bank keeps working O.K.," he said.

After Ms. Devon's death in 2010 at 76, their son, Colin Pip Dixon, set the play to music he wrote for violin and viola. Last summer, father and son took it to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe after performing it in the "East to

Edinburgh” series at 59E59 Theaters. “I love the play so much,” the elder Mr. Dixon said. “I just want people to see it.”

For Mr. McFarlane, a first-time playwright from South Salem, in Westchester County, the passion project is “Birds Should Fly Free,” in which a parrot named Alex has murderous ambitions. Mr. McFarlane’s foray into theater carries none of the pressure he felt in the early 1970s, he said, when he was fresh out of art school, trying to make it as a sculptor. “I’m finding a different way of being an artist,” he said. “I’m not trying to be the greatest playwright of my generation.”

Fear of revealing her age was the career anxiety that long stalked Ms. Shepard, of “Confessions of Old Lady #2.” In the 1970s and ’80s, she played the young hero Jim Hawkins in a touring musical production of “Treasure Island,” and she was convinced the producers would fire her if they knew her age. “I was 38 when I started and 54 when I finished, and, of course, I lied,” she said. A decade ago, it gradually began to feel “all right to be old.” Ms. Shepard named her show after her role in the 2008 Disney movie “College Road Trip.”

Ms. Prince is not shy about her age. Since she turned 60, she said, she’s had more work than ever: a reward, it seems, for staying in the game when “a lot of people are either dead or stopped.”

Like Ms. Prince, Ms. Shepard has no interest in retirement. “When people retire, they die in a way — and, very soon, really die,” Ms. Shepard said. “So I’m not going to.”

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