

# The New York Times

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## At Edinburgh Fringe, Small Shows With Big Ambitions

This year, the stronger productions in the open-to-all event were on a par with many in the more prestigious, curated Edinburgh International Festival.



Lara Foot's adaptation of "The Life and Times of Michael K.," J.M. Coetzee's Booker Prize-winning 1983 novel, includes actors alongside a puppet version of Michael K. and his elderly mother. Credit...Fiona MacPherson

### By Houman Barekat

The critic Houman Barekat saw 10 shows in four days at the Edinburgh Fringe.

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Shortly after I arrived in Edinburgh for this year's festival, I had lunch with a Scottish friend and her young son. The boy was enthralled by the colorful posters plastered all over the city advertising upcoming shows in the Fringe, the scrappy sidebar to the highbrow [Edinburgh International Festival](#). This year, the Fringe — which runs through Aug. 28 — comprises over 3,000 shows, and many posters featured eye-catchingly silly titles. My friend's son was particularly amused by "Sex Job," "My Sleepybum" and "A Shark Ate My Penis." His delighted guffaws were a fitting prelude to my stint in Edinburgh.

There was plenty of laughter at "[Hello Kitty Must Die](#)," a musical inspired by Angela Choi's cult novel of the same title. In this zippy farce, Sami Ma plays Fiona Yu, a Chinese

American lawyer fed up with being fetishized by white people and shouldering the unrealistic expectations of her out-of-touch parents. She reconnects with a mercurial childhood friend, Sean (Lennox T. Duong), and they embark on a ludicrous killing spree reminiscent of the movie “Heathers,” with musical numbers including a hymn to a silicone dildo.

The all-female cast is hugely talented, and their portrayals of obnoxious men were particularly striking for their impressively rendered physicality, whether the swaggering gait of a self-styled Lothario, the slumped posture of a feckless gamer, or the pompously militaristic bearing of the protagonist’s father.

Image



“Hello Kitty Must Die,” is another adaptation of a novel, with musical numbers and a standout all-female cast. Credit...Justine Barbin

Elsewhere, two dance productions explored somber subject matter with impressive subtlety. [“Woodhill,”](#) by the activist theater company [LUNG](#), examines the failings of a real British prison where a conspicuously high number of inmates have died by suicide. The story is told in a series of fragmentary voice-overs — interviews with lawyers, prison staff and bereaved relatives — while performers act out the relatives’ grief through dance, set to thumping electronic beats and strobe lighting. It’s a powerful spectacle, and the message — that Britain’s prisons need urgent reform — hits home.

[“Party Scene,”](#) by the Dublin troupe, [THISISPOPBABY](#), has a similar aesthetic. It depicts four gay Irishmen who are active in the “chemsex” scene, in which people hook up for sex under the influence of methamphetamines. The men’s choreographed dancing is pointedly joyless in its zombified roboticism; for all their synchronicity, they seem lonely and abstracted. The show evokes the existential bleakness of a comedown, of morning-after remorse and shame. And yet it doesn’t lapse into preachiness: The nightclub atmospherics are sufficiently appealing, in themselves, to suggest good times. (On the way out I overheard a theatregoer say to his friend: “I felt like it made me *want* to do chemsex ...”)

Image



From left: Liam Bixby, Anderson de Souza, Carl Harrison and Matthew Morris in “Party Scene.” Credit...Olga Kuzmenko



For budgetary and logistical reasons, many Fringe shows are relatively small productions, and there are always many for solo performers. One of these is [“The Insider,” by the Danish company Teater Katapult](#), in which Christoffer Hvidberg Ronje plays a lawyer implicated in a huge tax fraud. We find him in a transparent interrogation cell, weighing up whether to spill the beans in return for a reduced sentence. He does lots of sweating, writhing and shaking while oscillating between hubris and remorse. The protagonist’s back

story provides some intriguing psychodrama — an obsession with transcending his modest provincial origins led him to embrace a ruthless social Darwinism — his uncomplicated moral abjectness makes for a one-dimensional portrait. It's an open-and-shut case, in every sense.

In another one-man-show, "[The Ballad of Truman Capote](#)," Patrick Moys plays the renowned American author as he prepares to host a masked ball in 1966. Written by the Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan, the play is a maudlin monologue in which Capote muses gnominically on his childhood and career. ("Being published is not like being loved"; "My creative life is an unmade bed.") The problem is not the lack of action per se, but the monotonous timbre of the reminiscences: Capote's elliptical inwardness makes for dull company.

### **Editors' Picks**

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Holding the audience's attention is a perennial challenge with a single actor onstage. In a smart revival of Cyriel Buysse's Flemish classic, "[The Van Paemel Family](#)" by the Antwerp troupe SKaGeN, the actor Valentijn Dhaenens sidesteps this difficulty by playing all the play's roles. He takes three of the 13 characters in the flesh, and the rest appear in the form of prerecorded scenes digitally projected onto a screen.

The story revolves around a farmer who falls out with his two sons after they side with striking farmworkers during a period of social unrest. Mr. van Paemel is slavishly loyal to the landowner for whom they all work, and believes organized labor is a scourge. Even when he and his family are driven off their farm by rent hikes, and his daughter is cruelly taken advantage of by the landowner's son, he prefers to maintain his beef with his sons, rather than focus on those responsible for his plight.

There was something uncanny about seeing the real-life Dhaenens interact with his vaguely spectral digitized selves. This eerie visual texture, neatly complemented by the doleful tones of an accordion, made for a memorably unique aesthetic. The play dates from 1903, but the story's central character is a timeless archetype: The embattled patriarch who clings stubbornly to every reactionary shibboleth even as he gets shafted from all directions.

The standout Fringe show was [Lara Foot's stylish adaptation](#) of "The Life and Times of Michael K.," J.M. Coetzee's Booker Prize-winning 1983 novel about the struggles of a poor man during a fictional civil war in South Africa. The play is a collaboration with Handspring Puppet Company, best known for its work on "[War Horse](#)", and Michael K. and his elderly mother are represented by puppets that are manipulated and voiced by onstage performers.

Image



The interplay between puppets and actors made “J.M. Coetzee’s *The Life and Times of Michael K.*” a Fringe standout. Credit...Fiona MacPherson



Michael K. is a borderline simpleton, kindhearted and determined, but naïve; something about the puppet’s plaintive expression and scrawny frame evokes a pathos that fits the story perfectly. Yet this somewhat desolate tale is mitigated by moments of humor, such as when the famished Michael comes unstuck trying to eat a sandwich. Being a puppet, he can’t actually do it, so the three men controlling him hungrily take a bite each, on his behalf.

People think of the Fringe, which is open to anyone who can pay the accreditation fee, as defined more by quantity than quality. Yet the stronger Fringe shows were pretty much on a par — in intelligence, aesthetic ambition and technical execution — with several of the productions I saw [at the more prestigious, curated International Festival](#). The difference was mainly a question of scale.

For all its bustling, chaotic energy and anything-goes philosophy, the Fringe's organization was impressively slick, although there was, inevitably, the occasional blip. My heart went out to the cast of "[Exile for Two Violins](#)," whose performance at the French Institute was marred by noise pollution from a street party next to the venue, complete with a P.A. system blasting pop music. This delicate meditation on the life and work of the Hungarian composer Bela Bartok could probably have done without the accompaniment of loud rhythmic clapping, periodic cheers and whistles, and the booming strains of the White Stripes' garage rock anthem, "Seven Nation Army." The performers plowed on — heroes, one and all.

### **Edinburgh Festival Fringe**

Through Aug. 28 at various venues in Edinburgh; [edfringe.com](http://edfringe.com).