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Fringe Festival to feature striptease, rock 'n' roll

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NEW YORK - A Russian dancer peels off a chiffon toga - and, seemingly, some of her skin. A turtle emerges from its shell and romps in a pink tutu. And a reality show contestant writes a real-life story about his experiences in a rock band.

Welcome to this year's New York International Fringe Festival, an offbeat showcase of actors, musicians and performance artists that has become the largest and one of the most progressive theater festivals in America. It opens Friday and runs through Aug. 24 at 20 downtown theaters.

Organizers chose 204 shows - the largest number ever - from 720 submissions. Artistic director and co-founder Elena K. Holy said less than half that many applications were received in 1996, the festival's first year.

Since then, the festival has produced the Tony-winning Broadway musical, "Urinetown," which opened at the festival in 1999. And Fringe shows "Never Swim Alone" and "Last Train to Nibroc" went from the festival to off-Broadway.

Holy said she looked for "vibrancy, diversity and innovation" with this year's entries.

Six artists performed snippets of their performances at a news conference on Tuesday, including Eliza Jane Schneider, who provides the voices to all the female characters on Comedy Central's irreverent animated series, "South Park."

"I think of this as a sort of platform for real people," said Schneider, who quotes from oral histories she obtained on her 300,000-mile drive around the country in her one-woman show, "Freedom of Speech."

Schneider drove from 1993 to 1996 in an ambulance until it broke down, then continued her travels in a 1964 Metro International bread truck.

Pat Candaras, a widowed maritime union administrator who turned to comedy about five years ago, said she appreciates the festival's freedom.

"People tell me I'm not a true standup. I'm part storyteller," said Candaras, whose festival show is titled "Panic Is Not a Disorder."

At the festival, she said, "there are no restrictions."



AP Photo/Mary Altaffer

Ksenia Vidyaykina performs as a 1920's era strip tease dancer who takes off her cloths, and then her skin.

The performances also included a puppet show for children with the dancing turtle, and a musical written by "Cupid" contestant Paul Stancato about his experiences in a rock band.

In a performance called "Trapped," Russian dancer Ksenia Vidyaykina stripped off a chiffon toga and then rubber material made to look like her skin off her thighs, drawing red paint that looked a lot like blood.

Vidyaykina said she wanted to show "the guts and beauty" in peeling away her layers. She had never performed in the United States and is using the festival to introduce herself to the city's dance community.

"Nobody knows me," Vidyaykina said. "Who else is going to give me five days in a theater?"

On the Net:

Fringe Festival: www.fringenyc.org

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