

From North Jersey to NY Fringe Festival



Cresskill native Dina Laura, left, with John Olson and Matt Stapleton in "Elephants and Other Worldly Dilemmas."

There are 185 productions in this year's 19th annual New York International Fringe Festival, which runs from Aug. 14 to 30, and each one has a personal story attached — of striving, hope, fulfillment, and then more hope: Perhaps a festival appearance will be a launching pad for greater success.

In past years, a number of shows have been picked up for extensive runs, including "Urinetown," on Broadway; and, off-Broadway and regionally, "Matt & Ben," (the non-porn) "Debbie Does Dallas," "Silence! The Musical" and Dog Sees God." Fringe performers have included Bradley Cooper and Mindy Kaling.

Participants arrive, notably, from many different paths.

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Dina Laura, who was born and raised in Cresskill, where her mother still lives, nervously opened her response letter from the festival. "I just saw that it said, 'Congratulations,' and I thought, 'This can't really be happening.' I was like a kid in a candy store. I was just overwhelmed."

The festival's acceptance of her play "Elephants and Other Worldly Dilemmas" was an affirmation, a validation of her fight to succeed.

After a short stint following college as an accountant, Laura decided, some years back, to pursue her dream of being an actress.

"One day, I just bought a copy of Backstage, and saw all those auditions for actors, and I decided to go for it. It was a major life decision, but I was all in; there was no going back. I had no doubt that this was what I was meant to do.

"The struggle can get hard," added Laura, who earns a living as a server. ("I'm a cliché," she laughed.) "But I believe life means working hard."

Along the way, she added playwriting to her plate, and, with "Elephants," she combines her talents, playing two roles in her work, which she describes as a "wacky comedy.

"It's about five characters who are at odds with themselves over faith," she said. "Not necessarily religious faith. There can be questions of faith in humanity, in your friends or even faith in yourself."

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For Christopher Duva, whose acting career has spanned appearances on Broadway to working improv, his one-man show, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" – adapted from the title essay in David Foster Wallace's collection of non-fiction – is the fruition of an idea he's been nurturing for nearly 20 years.

"I read the piece in Harper's, in 1996, under its original title, 'Shipping Out,'" said Duva, who was born in Jersey City and spent some of his growing-up years in Harrington Park, attending Bergen Catholic High School as a freshman before his family moved to Ohio. "It just hit a chord with me," he said of Wallace's reminiscence about the fun he didn't have during a seven-day cruise. "My parents loved taking cruises, and I didn't enjoy them very much. It was the first Wallace piece I ever read, and it made me a fan."

Duva said he missed doing live theater in Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife and 11-year-old daughter, and this show allows him to do that. His motivation, though, was not to explore the solo-show format, but a compulsion to bring this particular story to the stage.

"I thought, why don't I ever do this," he said. "I sent a proposal to Wallace's widow, and she gave her permission, and I started working 2 1/2 years ago."

Duva said the adaptation, in which he portrays a number of characters as experienced by the story's narrator, proceeded fairly smoothly, thanks to Wallace's prose.

"People have remarked that his writing captured the 'brain voice,' the way we think," he said. "It's complicated thoughts expressed clearly."

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The Fringe Festival will be presented in 16 theater spaces in downtown Manhattan. Tickets for each show are \$18, with discount passes available if you plan to see multiple productions. For more information, schedules and ticket purchases, go to fringenyc.org.