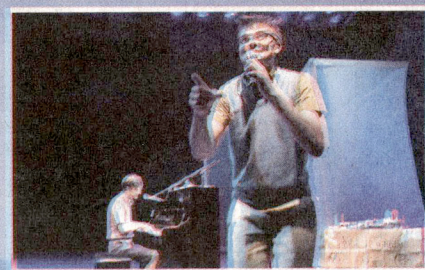


The New York Times

## A Fringe That Isn't Downtown, But Up In the Hills



INSET PHOTOGRAPHS, AT LEFT AND BOTTOM RIGHT, BY WENDY CARLSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; TOP RIGHT INSET BY TERRY WISE; BACKGROUND PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL J. LUTCH

By PATRICK HEALY

Scenes from the Berkshire Fringe festival in Great Barrington, Mass.: clockwise from top left, the audience at a performance of "The Disappearing Woman"; a Bella's Bartok concert; Micah Bucey in "The Gay Agenda's Great Big Broadway Show!"; and "The Disappearing Woman," a media-movement collaboration.

FROM New York City to Edinburgh to Adelaide, Australia, fringe theater festivals have become a staple of summertime culture, with troupes of actors producing experimental work on shoestring budgets and set-less stages. But none of these dozens of festivals are quite like the five-year-old Berkshire Fringe, in western Massachusetts, where its organizers work out of a cafe on Main Street because the wireless Internet is free.

"Most fringe festivals are in cities, but here we are, out in the Berkshires, writing press releases on our laptops over coffee and trying to save every cent that we can," said Sara Katzoff, one of the Fringe's three artistic directors, as she sat in the Fuel Coffee Shop in downtown Great Barrington. "Fringe theater is a different kind of theater, and we're a different kind of fringe."

Ms. Katzoff hatched the idea for the three-week festival soon after she graduated from Bard College at Simon's Rock, where the Berkshire Fringe is now running in a 100-

seat studio theater through Aug. 17. She recruited her boyfriend, Peter Wise, a musician, and Timothy Ryan Olson, a friend from Simon's Rock, to join her mission to bring young and new artists to this cultural destination known for venerable institutions.

The Berkshire Fringe has quickly become a respected fixture on the landscape here, drawing praise from local newspaper theater critics and respect for its grit at a time when some established fringe festivals have ceased to exist because of financial concerns, the most prominent demise being the Seattle Fringe's in 2004. The current Berkshire Fringe offerings include "Elephants and Gold," running through Monday, which blends song and movement to explore the relationship between humans and elephants, and "Phi Alpha Gamma," which runs next week, about brothers in a college fraternity dealing with the aftershocks of a gay-bashing incident.

"We knew we wanted to do the Fringe in the Berkshires because we thought the festival would add some-

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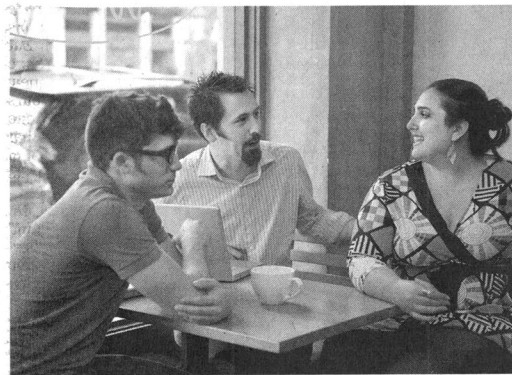
### Berkshire Bound

From Tanglewood to Williamstown, the music, dance and theater critics of The New York Times recommend performances in the Berkshires and environs this summer, Page 4.



MICHAEL J. LUTCH

# Not Downtown Fringe, But Up in the Hills



PHOTOGRAPHS BY WENDY CARLSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The founders of the Berkshire Fringe: from left, Timothy Ryan Olson, Peter Wise and Sara Katzoff, at the Fuel Coffee Shop.



TERRY WISE

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thing fresh to the landscape and because we thought the Berkshires hadn't fully developed as a place where emerging artists could have a voice," Ms. Katzoff said.

"But the learning curve for us was also steep at first, very steep," she added. "In the first year we were, like: 'How do you write a grant? What are articles of incorporation? What's a 990

## A steep learning curve for a different kind of festival.

form?" (an Internal Revenue Service form for nonprofit organizations).

Ms. Katzoff, 28, and Mr. Wise, 29, grew up in the Berkshires and attended Monument Mountain Regional High School in Great Barrington; they now live most of the year in Brooklyn, where Ms. Katzoff works as a freelance acting teacher and director, and Mr. Wise is a graphic designer and musician. Ms. Katzoff and Mr. Olson, 30, who is known as Ryan, met as theater students at Simon's Rock.

"The first e-mail I ever received in my life was from Ryan, asking me to be in one of his plays," said Ms. Katzoff, who agreed to play the role of a Jew-

ish woman hiding in Amsterdam during World War II. Mr. Olson, a playwright and furniture designer, now lives in the East Village of Manhattan.

"Growing up in the Berkshires, I was exposed to so much amazing culture, but I always felt that when you went to the theater, it had to be this really special occasion," Ms. Katzoff said. "I wanted to be part of a festival that would inspire younger people to say, 'Hey, let's go see some theater today, let's go see a show!'"

Mr. Wise, meanwhile, injected some administrative skill into organizing the Fringe from his years working in bookkeeping and marketing for Bang on a Can, which produces a summer music festival in the Berkshires. He and his two partners would often gather after work — at the software solutions company in New York where he had a job — to plan the Fringe, a process that took 16 months before the first summer of productions in 2005.

"We used a conference room at my old company for space to start planning everything out," Mr. Olson said. "And we used the photocopier — maybe," he admitted with a laugh.

The operating budget for the Fringe's first season in 2005 was \$25,000 and was supplemented by significant in-kind donations from Simon's Rock and local businesses. This season the budget is about \$70,000, with steady growth in private donations augmenting ticket sales. Mr. Olson said the Fringe had more than



Top, members of the Xylopholks — from left, Jonathan Singer, Bridget Kearney and Michael Calabrese — and above, Emma Dweck, at the Berkshire Fringe, a three-week summer festival of theater, dance and music in Great Barrington, Mass.

100 individual donors; the largest gift this year was \$2,100, he said, while the smallest gift was \$6.

As alumni of Simon's Rock, Ms. Katzoff and Mr. Olson had ready-made contacts among the campus faculty and staff to turn to for support. But the Fringe artists said they were pleased beyond all expectations with the college's generosity: it gives a cash contribution in most years, but this summer it is giving instead a larger-than-usual break on rates for use of the theater and other

facilities at Simon's Rock.

Christopher Sink, the director of college relations at Simon's Rock and the Fringe's chief partner on the campus, said the college's involvement went beyond championing the work of two of its graduates. He said he liked the idea of supporting a new arts venture whose mission was not only distinct from other theater and music festivals in the Berkshires, but also "complemented the nature of Bard College at Si-

mon's Rock," a nontraditional campus that is known for its four-year program incorporating the last two years of high school and the first two of college.

"The nature, the energy, the vibe of the Fringe is very contemporary and very youthful, and successfully captures something of the essence of the college itself," he said.

Mr. Sink said he was also impressed by the founders' pragmatism. "There's none of that at-

titude of 'let's throw it all out there, and we'll either have a hit season or go out of business with a bang,'" said Mr. Sink, who first met Ms. Katzoff a decade ago when he was managing director of Shakespeare & Company, in Lenox, Mass., and she was a member of that troupe's Young Company.

"They have a clear sense of how the festival can build and a surprising patience to give it the time it needs," he added. "I feel they're in this for the long haul."