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Downtown theater is celebrated at ninth annual Fringe Festival

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NEW YORK (AP)

The Fringe Festival defies easy classification. A three-week celebration of edgy and avant-garde theater and performance art in downtown Manhattan, the festival is a collection of 186 silly, serious and sometimes bizarre productions featuring characters such as a singing Hannibal Lecter and [a hangover Jenna Bush](#).

This year's festival, the ninth annual, begins Friday and runs through Aug. 28 at 20 venues in lower Manhattan. Tickets for all performances are \$15.

"This is like a candy store for someone who loves theater," said Charlie Barnett, a writer and director whose "The Last Days of Cleopatra," a musical about the troubled production of the Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton film "Cleopatra," will play at the festival.

The Fringe Festival has consistently grown since its inception, attracting an audience of approximately 60,000 people last year. This year, there were just under 1,000 applicants from about 20 countries seeking spots in the festival. They were whittled down by a panel of 80 various theater professionals during an 8-week process.

As a quick glance at the lineup for the festival attests, guidelines regarding the subject matter of the pieces that were selected were, at best, nebulous. In fact, the only instructions the panel were given involved making sure that each selection that made the cut embodied the "innovation, vibrancy and diversity" that the festival's producing artistic director Elena K. Holy strives for.

"We really want there to be something for everyone," Holy said. "We really want people to get swept up in it."

They seem to have achieved their goal.

This year's festival includes "Silence! The Musical," based on the Academy Award-winning - and decidedly nonmusical - film "The Silence of the Lambs"; ["The Miss Education of Jenna Bush," a one-woman comedy about the President's first daughter](#); "A Lesbian in the Pantry," which revolves around, well, a lesbian in a pantry; and a production based on Dalton Trumbo's anti-war novel, "Johnny Got His Gun."

There's also "Lynndie England Followed by No Space," a performance art piece about the disgraced soldier from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq; and "Basura!" a puppet show that bills itself as "a magical resurrection of trash."

"You sometimes feel like you can take more risks I think. It's sort of anything goes with the Fringe ... so that's kind of fun," said Jessica-Snow Wilson, an actress who has appeared on Broadway in shows such as "Les Miserables" and "Little Shop of Horrors." At the Fringe, she'll be starring in "Swimming Upstream," about a high school student who wants to write a Broadway musical and decides that his subject will be the life of sperm.

But for those who think the Fringe sounds too off-the-wall for their tastes, remember, it has launched its share of mainstream successes. Off-Broadway shows such as "Never Swim Alone," "Debbie Does Dallas" and "Matt & Ben" all got their start at the Fringe. "Super Size Me" star Morgan Spurlock and Paul Marcarelli, the "Can you hear me now?" guy from the Verizon commercials, are among the notable alumni.

"I think it's absolutely amazing," said comedian Melissa Rauch, who plays the title role in "The Miss Education of Jenna Bush."

"It's a wonderful experience. You're catching things as they're hitting."

The one show from the Fringe's past that almost all participants cite when talking about turning a festival appearance into a Broadway success is "Urinetown." The musical about a town where people have to pay to go to the bathroom was a hit at the Fringe in 1999, opened off-Broadway, and eventually made it to Broadway, where it ran for more than two years, garnered several Tony awards and closed at a profit.

"We kind of became noticed as the place to get your musical to Broadway," Holy said.

Now, she said, "We consider ourselves the research and development lab for the industry."

And the prospect of seeing a hit show before it has entered the mainstream is one of the reasons the Fringe's audience keeps growing. The dream of that kind of success is what motivates performers to put up with the idiosyncrasies of the festival _ performances have to be two hours or less and many times there are only 15 minutes in which to set up _ to get themselves seen.

"I think this brings out such great things in performers. They know they're going to be performing for an audience that's there to see the outside edge," Barnett said. "Personally, I can't wait."

Festival organizers hope theatergoers feel the same way.

"It's a festival of underdogs and we have sort of a scrappy personality," Holy said, "and that's why New Yorkers have taken to it."