

Paula on the Fringe: All the Lonely People

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The one-handed play is always a reliable Fringe staple – easy and cheap to mount, works well in 60-minute blocks, and you don't have to split the box office receipts with your cast mates.



Elizabeth Blue as – well – “Elizabeth Blue”

But as I was poignantly reminded as I began my Fringing in earnest this Friday, the one-person show is also the perfect idiom to explore the themes of loneliness and social isolation, the painful inability to connect with others.

Elizabeth Blue is a Brooklyn-based stand-up comedienne and improv artist, making her

Edmonton Fringe Festival debut with a sly and irreverent one-woman show, *Am I Blue*, about the spiritual and romantic misadventures of a self-absorbed, underemployed New York actress called – “Elizabeth Blue.”

We follow the Elizabeth Blue character as she visits her “life coach”, attends a writing workshop, goes to a small business seminar, meets a sex therapist, and consults her “astrologist” – all in a shallow and vain, in every sense, effort to “find herself”. It's a devastating send-up of the self-help industry, with all its jargon about past lives, inner children, chakras, and self-actualization. The bitter truth, which we can see, but “Elizabeth” can't, is that her isolation and loneliness aren't just because she doesn't know who she is, but because she's so selfish and superficial, she can't begin to see who anyone else is either. In real life, she'd be insufferable – the toxic “friend” who never wants to hear about your problems or triumphs, but only wants to talk about her own. Yet Blue the performer/ writer is skilled enough to let us see and feel her character's very real pain and vulnerability, to make us want to slap and hug her at the same time. The series of satiric Bob Newhart-style monologues make you quite literally laugh out loud – but they also make you wince, as you remember all the times you acted just a little like this yourself.

The hour-long piece comes to a somewhat abrupt and unsatisfying end – as though Blue had hit her time limit, without quite getting her character where she needed to be. Still, the winsome performer offers such a charming and funny critique of the way in which we lose ourselves in the quest for self-awareness, it's a pleasure to spend 60 minutes in her company. (You'll find *Am I Blue* at Venue 44, La Cite Francophone, in the Suzanne Thibaudeau auditorium – a fine air-conditioned venue with clean flush toilets, a bookstore, and a snack bar. Hey, as a veteran Fringer, I can tell you that these things matter, sometimes.)

Finding Nymma, written and performed by Edmonton actor and drama teacher Fiona Williams, introduces us to a lonely young woman of quite a different sort. If Elizabeth Blue doesn't know who she is, Nymma knows all too well. A pathologically shy university reference librarian with anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and a few Asperger-like traits, Nymma is a reluctant empath. She can read other people's emotions, whether she wants to or not, and they throw her into painful confusion. The only way she can order her world is to cut herself off from human contact, count each step, stick to a strict routine, and go only to the places she knows, at the same time every day. Then, one day, she rebels – after a fashion. In an isolated, never-visited corner of the library's fifth floor, she creates her own "fish bowl" – a secret lair where she can indulge in her illicit love for expensive chocolate truffles, hula-hooping and haiku. She hides a pet gold fish in the stacks, and makes him her only companion.

But when a shy grad student leaves a note for Nymma in the stacks, admitting that he's "seen" her, in a way no one else has before, Nymma has to decide. Will she hide forever? Or will she take a chance on making a human, emotional connection, with all the risk of pain that entails?



Fiona Williams as Nymma – there's more than one kind of fish bowl

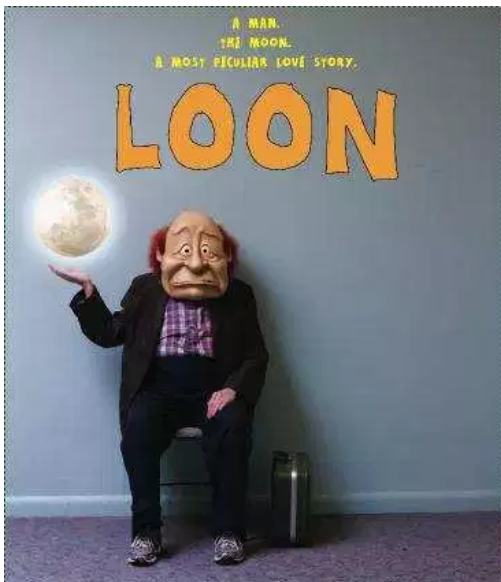
Williams' Nymma is charming in a completely different way from the brash and emotionally tone-deaf Blue. She's sweet and vulnerable, and she allows us to fall in love with her a little bit, even as we laugh at her quirks and emotional evasions. And Williams, a dancer by training, gives subtle but artful physicality to Nymma's awkwardnesses. She also makes highly effective and evocative use of the strange and narrow thrust stage in the Phabrik Art and Design Centre, a stage that's actually a fashion run-way, in the non-Fringe season. In the end, rather like Elizabeth Blue, Williams doesn't seem to know quite how to end

her character's story – and the final plot twist falls a bit flat. Still, watching Nymma's narrative arc unfurl is well worth the trouble. (At BYOV 30, the Phabrik Art and Design Centre at 10055 – 80 Ave....well off the beaten Fringe track. Leave yourself time to get there if you're walking over from the main site....but on the up side, there's plenty of free parking in the area, which makes it a Fringe rarity.)

But the most poignant and dramatically successful exploration of loneliness I was lucky enough to see on Friday was a one-woman show of a radically different sort. In *Loon*, Kate Braidwood dons a remarkable tragicomic mask – really, a big false head – to embody a sad and lonely man, Francis, a gentle janitor who's just lost the only person he ever loved – his mother. Francis has a rich fantasy life, in which he sees himself as Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* or Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind*. But in real life, he's the bachelor who can't get a date with a telephone dating service, the man who still plays dress-up at night, acting out scenes from his favourite SF magazines and movies.

But one night, he does find love. Not with a human woman. But with – the moon.

Yes, the moon. But while their most unlikely romance starts out well, as in many fairy-tales, it veers into tragedy. And Francis must finally decide whether he can afford to be selfish – or whether he has to sacrifice his happiness to save the moon, and humanity itself.



Portland's Wonderheads present a luminous love story

As a plot synopsis, it sounds absurd. But the show, by Portland's Wonderheads Theatre is a magnificent mix of puppetry, mime, soundscape and mask-work that gives the life of a poor urban schlemiel such dignity and pathos, you can't help but be moved, first to laughter, then to tears. And when Braidwood comes out and takes off her head – as it were – it's jarring to realize that the balding, middle-aged, pot-bellied man whose story has mesmerized you, has been enacted all along by a slim and pretty young woman, the sort of girl the real Francis

could never hope to win.

Loon is a truly remarkable piece of stage craft. But even more, it's a remarkable imaginative leap – a reminder that what connects us as people is

far deeper and subtler than the physical and social surfaces that so often divide and separate us from our fellow man. (Also at Stage 44)

*PLEASE NOTE: I am NOT an official **Edmonton Journal** Fringe reviewer, and these are NOT official **Edmonton Journal** reviews. I'm just a political columnist with a deep love for theatre. I buy my own tickets, pay with my own money to see what I want to see – on my own time, not the paper's – and share my unsolicited opinions here. Take them for what they are – not the official view of the newspaper, but my own very individual perspective.*

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