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Theatrical flurry with Fringe on top

By JILL DEARMAN
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

This is the most important part of the rehearsal process," says Eben Moore, who's wrapped in a black skirt. "The cigarette break."

Moore, 26, is one of three men portraying women in a new production of French playwright Jean Genet's classic balletic fable "The Maids."

And this is one of the more traditional shows in the decidedly untraditional Fifth Annual New York International Fringe Festival, which starts today and runs through Aug. 26.

Spread over 20 venues on the lower East Side, the festival will showcase 198 separate productions, along with panel discussions, workshops and a "Fringe Jr." series for children and families. General admission is \$12.

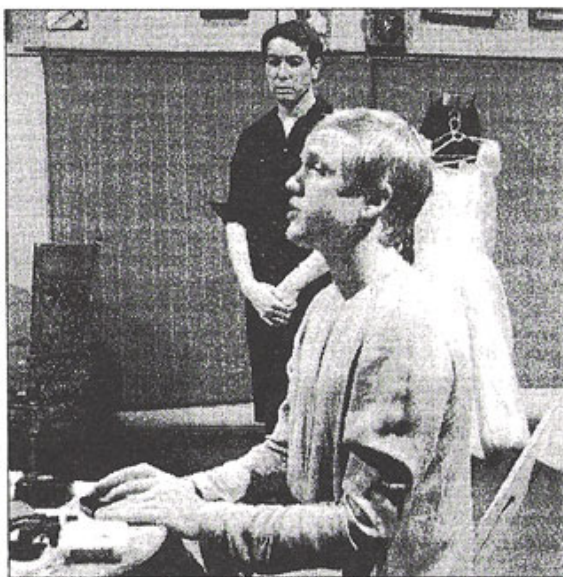
Their short nicotine break over, the "Maids" ensemble returns for rehearsal under director Elizabeth Williamson, a serene 22-year-old with an accent that's part New England (where she grew up) and part Old England (she studied French Literature at Oxford).

On a "no-budget budget" ("under \$500," says Williamson) they bring Genet's deeply cutting words to life in midtown rehearsal studio Nola.

Downtown, at Fringe Festival headquarters — the Present Company Theater on Stanton St. — Baltimore-based Living Room Company rehearses "Box." It's an original rock 'n' roll fable that takes off from Joseph Campbell's "The Hero With a Thousand Faces."

The atmosphere is as irreverent and relaxed as a college coffee house. A rubber chicken lies downstage center.

"Theater is so beautiful," says Michael Patrick Smith, the 25-year-old writer/director/composer of "Box." "In a



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'MAID' GUYS: Dustin Tucker (l.) and Eben Moore rehearse a reworking of the play by Jean Genet.

film you can rewind. In a film there's the frozen moment. What's so great about the stage is that it's there for just an instant. It's the interplay between the actors, and it's different every night, and then when it's gone it's just gone."

Meanwhile, a time zone away, "Angst: 84" director/producer Dan Kilbane, 28, and writer Toni K. Thayer, 30,

worry about getting their cast and crew of 19 from their home base in Cleveland to New York City and a shot at recognition.

"My main hope is Sally Field-esque," says Kilbane, in a phone conversation. "I hope the audience likes — really likes — 'Angst: 84.' I think they will.

"It's about the 1980s, and that was a great decade — if you take away Reagan, Bush, Martika, Debbie Gibson and Milli Vanilli."

When asked about mainstream aspirations, Thayer says, "I have a dream to make my living as a writer of fiction and plays, and to do that I will have to find some sort of mainstream success.

"I'm particularly excited by things that start out on the edge somewhere and are brought into the mainstream without losing their integrity. A great current example is 'Urinetown.'"

That show started at the Fringe in 1999, moved to Off-Broadway and opens Sept. 13 on Broadway.

Fringe Festival producer John Clancy, 37, talks about "Urinetown's" crossover success, as he flips burgers at a "Fringe Barbecue" for artists in a Stanton St. parking lot.

"That's all great, but that's not the point of it," he says. "The Fringe wasn't designed to move work on, because basically that just deepens the idea that there's a legitimate theater and a ragtag illegitimate 'wannabe' theater."

But the separation between mainstream and, well, fringe, serves to remind these writers, directors and actors that it's a tough world out there.

"I did a film called 'Suits,' about the advertising industry, with Robert Klein," says Moore, the actor in "Maids." "It was fun, but it was also a rude awakening to how this business works.

"I thought, 'Oh, I did a film, now I'll do one after that and another,' and then ... no one's returning my phone calls."