



CULTURE DESK

Now Starring Downtown: President Bush

By PIA CATTON

All theater is political, they say. And even if that's not the case, it might as well be in this election year.

For the Eighth Annual New York International Fringe Festival, the sprawling theatrical free-for-all that starts this Friday, the event's organizers sorted through some 900 applications for about 200 slots, according to Ron Lasko, the festival's publicist and one of its adjudicators. By his estimate, about 20% — enough for an entire Fringe — were overtly political. Those entries, he said, could easily have taken over. "We had to be careful not turn this into a political theater festival," said Mr. Lasko.

Just a look at the titles of many shows that were included suggests what a task that was. "The Passion of George W. Bush: The Vision Thing" is a musical combining two hot-button topics that have vexed the left in the last year. "9/11 — The Book of Job" sees George Bush and Osama bin Laden taking roles in the biblical tale. In "Apocalypse! Book One" an angry Jesus Christ decides to run for president against President Bush. "John Walker: The Musical" is exactly what it sounds like.

The rash of topical political work is part of a larger expression of political frustration — similarly themed works can be seen elsewhere in downtown theater as well as in art galleries or, indeed, movie houses. For many playwrights and directors taking their message to the Fringe Festival provides both a chance to get their work noticed and to get their licks in while they can.

"In a society that has become bifurcated in terms of politics, theater artists are choosing to make comments in their medium," said the American Theater Wing's executive director, Howard Sherman. "Artists see it as an opportunity that's been handed to them."

So what do they make of that opportunity?

Most of the political works that will be featured at the Fringe are extremely topical and directly invoke current political figures and recent events. There is not the patina of fictionalization that Brecht introduced into a work such as "The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui," nor the call-to-arms enthusiasm and didacticism of Clifford Odets's "Waiting for Lefty."

In many cases, the star (or co-star) of the show is Mr. George W. Bush himself.

Playwright and lyricist Adam Mathias, 30, created "The Passion of George W. Bush" with friends from NYU's Musical Theater Program. The show, which will run throughout the festival at the Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace University, depicts the life of the 43rd president, with particular attention from birth to the vision from God that made him a born-again Christian. "We're going to show his interaction with God and how that set him on a course," Mr. Mathias said.

Mr. Mathias has no pretenses about making a work of enduring value — this is theater with an expiration date. "November is a deadline for this

story," he said. "We're hoping it's a past-tense issue by then."

In "Hanging Chad," which will be performed next week at the Plaza Café at Pace, a Harlem-born man returns to his old neighborhood after living in Florida for several years. "He's an investment banker in Florida and he was disenfranchised in 2000," explained playwright Greg Klein, 33. "His vote was taken away from him by Jeb Bush and Katherine Harris."

Mr. Klein explained that he doesn't know anyone personally who was disenfranchised. But his urge — and that of others — to create political theater comes by way of general anger towards the administration.

"We're seeing more and more political theater," he said. "There are more people who are frustrated with the last four years and the war. In better times we would focus on other things."

George W. will be sharing the stage at Schimmel with John Walker Lindh. John McCloskey and his co-writer Jean Strong wrote "John Walker: The Musical" after finding themselves identifying with the "American Taliban," as the disaffected youth was dubbed. The press and television networks, he said, created a monster. "He was made out to be a freak," he said. "Every town in America has this kid."

Mr. McCloskey said he tries to treat such serious topics without being dull. "It's important that there is a forum for [political theater], and that it is entertaining," he said. "I have little patience for didactic forms of it."

Not all works are quite so topical, or so preoccupied with personalities in the news. Politics has been a running theme in the work of Herman Farrell III — whose father is New York State Democratic Committee chairman Herman "Denny" Farrell, Jr. The young Mr. Farrell is the creator of "Rome," a George W. Bush-era companion piece to go with his Clinton-era work "Portrait of a President" (which won the Fringe's Playwriting Award in 2002).

While the earlier piece was about four artists who met while gathering to work on a portrait of Mr. Clinton, "Rome" is about irreconcilable differences. Against the backdrop of the Florida recount, two Republicans and two Democrats meet up. They begin to form relationships, but ultimately are kept apart by politics.

"'Rome' is not a polemic or a rant," he said. But he defends his compatriots who do take a meaner tack. "I do believe there is a place for rants, especially now," he said.

Another playwright hoping to change perception is Negin Farsad, 28, author of "Bootleg Islam." The story mirrors Ms. Farsad's own life, as an Iranian-American woman going to a cousin's wedding in 1999, but she hopes to create "a new paradigm" for American perceptions of her ancestral homeland. "Whenever we see Iranians, they're dusty people who stand around in villages and don't have jobs," she said.

She said she has more important issues to tackle than attacking the current president.

"Bush-bashing is relatively uninteresting now," she said. "It's important to go beyond that."

For many playwrights and directors taking their message to the Fringe Festival provides both a chance to get their work noticed and to get their licks in while they can.