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Chance of Showers will bring its satirical sexual harassment training seminar to Estrogen Fest 2007.

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sisters Maritza and Belinda Cervantes; Gamino Thief, an all-female punk trio who also founded Girls Rock Chicago!, whose innovative summer camp fosters "girls' creative expression, positive self-esteem and community awareness through rock music;" and challenging, experimental rock scientists MiLiBaby.
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PREVIEW

This year Estrogen Fest hinges on the 'Fringes'
By Moira McCormick
Special to the Tribune

May 11, 2007

The irreverent and unconventional women-centric Estrogen Fest arts extravaganza, now in its fifth biennial iteration, runs May 16-25 at the Prop Thtr Building. And over those 10 consecutive days, 50-plus Chicago artists -- not only women, but men as well -- will present live theater, music, dance, poetry, comedy, visual and performance art, even vaudeville and burlesque.

As always, the iconoclastic Est Fest promises "no crying, no male-bashing." Well, maybe just a bit; for instance, the unseen stuffed-shirt boss in Kristy Lockhart's taut, tart period piece "The Executive Secretary" is from all indications a world-class chauvinistic oaf.

Estrogen Fest '07's title, "Back on the Fringes!," reflects the festival's relocation north from its previous downtown headquarters, the City of Chicago-owned Storefront Theater at Gallery 37, to Albany Park's independent Prop Thtr. As a result, Est Fest's curators have more freedom to explore the myriad facets of women.

"At Storefront," says Joanie Schultz, co-artistic director of Est Fest along with founder Ann Filmer, "one of our visual art pieces was a painting of naked women on the theater floor. We had to cover it every night so the kids taking Gallery 37 arts classes wouldn't see it."

But this year's Estrogen Fest "is an edgier festival than we've had in a long time," says Schultz. "We've even got a politically charged burlesque show." Titled "Amerika" and performed by Maiden Sacrifice (a.k.a. Cathy Russell, whose slogan is "Changing the world two nipples at a time" and who describes the program as "an intense political piece that confronts the Bush regime.")

Co-artistic director Schultz's own Est Fest contribution, "Pulled to the Bull," is similarly provocative. Through the Greek myth of Pasiphae -- the Cretan queen who consorted with a bull and thus birthed the monstrous Minotaur -- Shultz's monologue explores why many of us are drawn to obviously unhealthy, even dangerous, relationships. Schultz, who drew on her own experiences with a far-from-ideal lover -- and who remarks, "I was really in the moment and passionate, and that's not necessarily a bad thing" -- employs a herd of 12-inch-high inflatable cows as her know-it-all Greek chorus. "They're perfect -- they can look friendly or menacing, depending on the lighting," she says.

From blow-up bovines to beach toys: in "Can't We All Just Float Along?" the Cindy Brandle Dance Co.'s lighthearted ode to interpersonal harmony, choreographer Brandle and three dancers tussle and tangle, but eventually work it out, amid a colorful flotilla of vinyl inner tubes. "When I'm doing Est Fest, I always present pieces that promote social justice -- with humor," says Brandle.

"Float Along" is part of the May 20 lineup, titled "Elemental Estrogen." Unlike Est Fest 2005, which presented three weeks of programs under two major thematic umbrellas, this year's model is

trimmed down to 10 days, each with its own theme -- "Eclectic Estrogen," "Obsessive Estrogen," "Work That Estrogen" and more -- culminating May 25 in "A Closing Night of Mythic Proportions." On "Bonus Dose Weekend" (May 19-20), short performances alternate throughout both days with classes, panel discussions and workshops: from "Sex, Diversity and YOU!," Chance of Showers' satirical sexual harassment training seminar, to RTG Dance's "Moving Like Elvis" workshop.

Plus, says Est Fest founder Filmer, "We wanted to focus this year on a conversation between the artists, give and take between themselves and the audience." So it is that each program ends with a new feature called AfterWords, a discussion among all the evening's artists, with audience participation welcomed.

Following AfterWords, music performances will take place, featuring such acts as The Luna Blues Machine, an acoustic/hip-hop/Latin/soul outfit led by sisters Maritza and Belinda Cervantes; Gamine Thief, an all-female punk trio who also founded Girls Rock Chicago!, whose innovative summer camp fosters "girls' creative expression, positive self-esteem and community awareness through rock music;" and challenging, experimental rock scientists MiLkBaBY.

Estrogen Fest

Beach toys, burlesque, bovines and more

When: May 16-25

Where: Prop Thtr, 3502 N. Elston Ave.

Price: \$7-\$32 (\$50 for all-festival pass); 773-539-7838 or www.estfest.org

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