

# Fringe Fest Fever

YOUR GUIDE TO THE BEST BETS AT THE 160-SHOW FESTIVAL

# NOW

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a voluminous red ruffled dress, is captured in mid-dance against a bright blue background. Her arms are outstretched, and her legs are slightly bent, conveying a sense of movement and energy.

SPECIAL SUMMER  
**DOUBLE ISSUE**

NEXT ISSUE JULY 20

## JENNIFER WALLS

THE SINGULAR SENSATION  
PLAYS MUSICAL CHAIRS  
IN **FOUR** BIG SHOWS

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WARREN P. SONODA,  
JOANNE O'SULLIVAN  
AND **FOUR** RED HOT  
LOCAL COMICS

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# JENNIFER WALLS adds pizzazz to the Fringe Festival

The multitalented actor sings up a storm in four shows at this year's fest. Over the next 12 days, keep your eye on her, **Warren P. Sonoda**, **Joanne O'Sullivan** and a bunch of rowdy comics (all interviewed in this issue). And check out [nowtoronto.com/fringe](http://nowtoronto.com/fringe) for our day-after reviews. **By GLENN SUMI**



Hair and makeup: **Angela Rose** / Wardrobe: **Wildthing Vintage**

**I**f anyone represents the DIY, let's-put-on-a-show attitude of the Fringe, it's Jennifer Walls.

The energetic and charismatic artist has worn many hats at the festival over the years, both as a producer (Rebecca Perry's Redheaded Coffeeshop Girl shows, Kevin Proulx's Baker's Dozen) and performer (Love Is A Poverty You Can Sell, Liza Live!, Hugh & I).

But this year marks her biggest Fringe outing yet.

She's performing in two shows: Seeking Refuge, a musical tragedy about two siblings separated because of their country's civil war (the show won the fest's Paul O'Sullivan Prize for best script of a new musical), and the kids' musical Jay & Shilo's Sibling Revelry, in which she plays a fairy who learns to overcome her stage fright.

Plus, she's got the lead in the first night of the cult hit Confidential Musical Theatre Project, in which she'll show up with her part learned for a musical (she can't tell me which, but it's one of her faves) without knowing who else is joining her onstage; and she's hosting a SINGular Sensation karaoke cabaret night at the Fringe Club, basically transplanted from her Monday night gig at Statlers.

No wonder she's feeling a little under the weather when I sit down with her a couple weeks before the fest. Actually, she tells me that she's just been diagnosed with having low iron and has had to receive her first injection of liquid iron, which helped get her through a recent gig she did as Lady Gaga.

"So basically, I've been running on half a tank for the past two years," she says.

As someone who's seen her perform several times in that period, including a thrilling winter night in which she workshopped her show Jagged Little Me, an autobiographical take on Alanis Morissette's groundbreaking album Jagged Little Pill, you would never know Walls was ever giving anything but 110%.

The show must go on, right?

"I don't do 'bored' well," says Walls in her scratchy, distinctive voice. "I can't even remember the last time I was bored. Everything I've done has been out of a need to do something that I wanted done or that I thought could be done better: from helping to produce Rocky Horror Show at what eventually became Lower Ossington Theatre to producing and playing a role in a staged drag version of Clueless during Pride."

Walls traces her love of theatre – especially musical theatre – to being taken by her Ottawa-area parents to see The Phantom Of The Opera in Toronto. The tickets were a Christmas gift from her dad.

"My mom, dad and grandma came here and we stayed at the Super 8 on Spadina," she recalls. "I was seven and got my first Communion dress early so I could look like Christine. I've been obsessed with big hair ever since seeing that show."

Several Phantom-related incidents – being taught by June Crowley, an alternate Christine, while at Sheridan's musical theatre program; duetting with another Christine, Susan Cuthbert, during a fundraiser; and befriending and singing with yet another Christine, Rebecca Caine – have reinforced that she's on the right path.

She was a finalist on Phantom composer

Andrew Lloyd Webber's How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria? reality TV show.

And earlier this year, David Rogers, one of the artistic directors at the Victoria Playhouse Petrolia, where she frequently performs, gave her the scarf he wore as Phantom's Raoul for her birthday after she sang a Rita MacNeil song that resonated with personal challenges she was going through.

"And then there's the time I talked to Liza Minnelli!" she exclaims. While doing a show with Broadway legend Ben Vereen, she did her Liza impression for him. "A while later he came to me and said, 'I've got Liza on the phone.' I was speechless."

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It's hard to believe that, like the character she plays in the kids' Fringe show, the magnetic, watchable Walls still suffers from stage fright.

"I've had bad anxiety all my life, and I was diagnosed with depression a few years ago," she says. "I understand not wanting to make a mistake in front of people and being afraid of it all. Confidence is hard for me."

This coming from a person who, as a teen, arranged festivals and concerts in her hometown of Renfrew, Ontario, even though she was bullied and teased as a nerd by many of her inside-the-box peers.

The first time she hosted SINGular Sensation in the gay village six years ago, she started telling stories because of the cabaret format, and someone in the audience told her to shut up and sing.

"That just completely shut me down," she says. "I'd challenge that guy to say it to me now. I'd be able to assert myself more. I've tried to make that room a safe space. I tell singers to try out a song they've never done before, that it's okay to make a mistake."

She'd like to continue to develop Jagged Little Me, which includes lots of home movie footage and touches on her parents' divorce, her eating disorder and other family issues they didn't talk about at the time. And now that Morissette has announced her own musical based on the same album, she's eager to audition for it.

She's also working on a show featuring the music of Nine Inch Nails, saying that Trent Reznor's music has helped her deal with lots of personal pain.

She recently starred in a stage version of Bruce McDonald's film Hard Core Logo, and



SAMUEL ENGELKING

#### SEEKING REFUGE

by Rick Jones (Thick and Thin Theatre/Fringe). At the Randolph (736 Bathurst). July 7 at 3:30 pm, July 8 at 9:15 pm, July 9 at 3 pm, July 11 at 9 pm, July 13 at 7 pm, July 14 at 4 pm, July 16 at 5:15 pm. \$12. [fringetoronto.com](http://fringetoronto.com)

#### JAY & SHILO'S SIBLING REVELRY

by Alisse Lee Goldenberg, Anthony Bastianon and Brett McCaig (Triplets Theatrical/Fringe). At the Kidsfest/George Ignatieff Theatre (15 Devonshire). July 6 at 2:45 pm, July 8 at 3:45 pm, July 10 at 11:45 am, July 11 and 14 at 10 am, July 13 at 3 pm, July 16 at 1:30 pm. \$5-\$12. [fringetoronto.com](http://fringetoronto.com)

says it was cathartic to be in that angry, dirty, aggressive place.

"I grew up listening to punk and rock, Metallica and Ozzy Osbourne," she says.

She credits her mother, who raised her and her two siblings alone while working four jobs, for her work ethic. She's grateful for everything, especially when she considers what other people have experienced.

"Like the characters in Seeking Refuge," she says, ever the producer, expertly segueing into discussing one of her Fringe shows.

"The sisters' parents have been killed and they want to escape, but they can only afford for one of them to emigrate to another country. People are facing this every day all over the world."

"I live in a country where there is health care, my family is here, there's support, I have good friends. Whatever happens, I can deal with it," she says.

As a day job, she is the voice of TV's Family Jr channel. One day she'd like to get an animated series, or book a Mirvish musical. But she's not complaining. She's giving it time, especially now that she's entering a new, post-ingénue period in her career.

"I played Dorothy in The Wizard Of Oz one year, and that taught me something. You've got to take the grey, appreciate the rainbows and deal with the storms, and just keep going."

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