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## Arts festival promises the weird and wonderful

### Fringe Wilmington seeks experimental performance artists for October event

By *RYAN CORMIER*  
*The News Journal*

The continuing experiment to pump new life into downtown Wilmington just got a lot more experimental.

The city will hold its first fringe festival, known as Fringe Wilmington, over four days in October, Wilmington announced Wednesday.

The festival will focus on innovative performance, and visual and cinematic arts, much like other fringe festivals throughout the world and the United States.

"We hope this can bring a new attention to us and be another way to get people to come out and visit the city," Wilmington Mayor James Baker said.

Much like the nearest fringe festival, which is held in Philadelphia each September, Fringe Wilmington will focus on unconventional and experimental art that entertains and sometimes challenges audiences.

The city is putting out the call to artists of all kinds to go to [www.fringewilmingtonde.com](http://www.fringewilmingtonde.com) for an application, which is due to the city by June 1. Everything from music, theater and spoken word to visual art, installation art and feature-length films are welcomed at the festival.

A board will assess the applications and create the full four-day schedule, which will include performances at traditional venues like the Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, the baby grand, OperaDelaware's black box theater and Theatre N, along with non-traditional spaces that could include outdoor performances in parking lots.

Built into the festival is a 24-hour filmmaking competition, which will give filmmakers one day to take a randomly selected genre and surprise element, turning it into a 5-minute film.

Since there is a \$50 application fee and tickets to each performance will cost the public \$10, the festival should be mostly self-supporting, said Baker, whose city is facing a \$9 million deficit. A budget for the festival isn't available yet, because it will be driven by the number of applicants and performances, city officials said.

Even with a struggling economy, Baker said, it's important to move on with projects like Fringe Wilmington -- events that push to bring new people into the city and give residents something different and new. "Art is important in bad times and good times," he said. "And it's a huge economic generator."

The city hopes the festival will drive tourism. Officials are working with downtown hotels to craft weekend packages for people coming to Fringe Wilmington.

With newer Wilmington residents filling downtown Wilmington's latest condos and apartment buildings, there's a thirst for something off-beat, said Wilmington Cultural Affairs Director Tina Betz.

"Their taste is a little more adventurous than the non-urban dwellers, quite frankly," she said. "Many of them come from larger urban centers and they expect things that are new and a little more cutting edge."

Jerad Shaffer, co-owner of the edgy rock club Mojo 13 just outside of Wilmington, has hosted everything from fire-breathers and ventriloquists to sword-swallowers and groups that suspend themselves from hooks through body piercings. He knows of several experimental musical acts that would be a good fit for Fringe Wilmington -- a festival that embraces the outsider theme of his stage, which has been open for more than three years.

"I'm all into that -- there's a kinship there," Shaffer said of the festival. "It's good for Delaware. My whole reason for opening Mojo was that I knew there were people who didn't want to drive to Philly all the time for stuff like this. I certainly give this two thumbs up."

One look at the application gives a good idea of how far-out some of the projects could be, with organizers asking artists if their work involves adult language, nudity, simulated violence or even gunshots.

"Of course taste can be subjective, but we are looking for things that are tastefully done," Betz stressed. "The components of what that is may vary, but it has to be appropriate in the context of the art. We are very aware that this is city-produced, but we are also aware that this is a fringe festival and we are asking artists to push the boundaries."

Baker said the matter of taste will not veer into politics if, say, an artist's project involves a subject that the city might not want highlighted, like gun violence.

"If someone wants to do a documentary on a family of a shooting victim or about the shootings and why they happen, I don't see that being excluded because they are making a point on a particular sore subject of crime and all the rest," he said. "But sometime you might have something that's just ludicrous that, yeah, there might be someone in the world with a taste for it, but I'm not one of those people."

For now, organizers like Rich Neumann hope word of Wilmington Fringe makes it to local and regional artists who will then apply. "This is a great opportunity for them to express themselves and explore the outer edges of their art," he said.

## **FRINGE WILMINGTON**

Fringe Wilmington, a festival of unconventional and experimental art, will be held at various venues across Wilmington Oct. 1-4. Applications and additional details are available at [www.fringewilmingtonde.com](http://www.fringewilmingtonde.com). Applications must be submitted by June 1.

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