

Expect the unexpected as Kris Stewart delivers the Sydney Fringe festival, writes **Harriet Alexander.**

It began with an inner-west cliché too obvious to have been scripted. Three men sat in the Enmore Theatre Cafe. Two of them were theatre directors with a single vision. The third was a talented outsider with big ideas.

One coffee led to another and an ambitious plan was born.

The two luminaries were Mark Cleary from Newtown Theatre and Greg Khoury from Century Venues, who clutched a report vindicating their belief that Sydney was ripe to stage an alternative arts festival in its cultural hub, the inner west.

The third man, Kris Stewart, then the Melbourne director of Broadway hit *Wicked*, was the man to do it.

It was to be a fringe festival that celebrated all that was unique about Sydney, disinterring from obscurity a cacophony of acts otherwise too bizarre, esoteric or bawdy to find a venue prepared to host them. And it was to show Sydney audiences what they were missing out on.

If anybody knew how much chutzpah it took to get a break in a big city, it was Stewart.

He had recently returned from a seven-year stint in New York, where he had been sufficiently precocious to establish a musical theatre festival in the spiritual home of musical theatre and sufficiently competent to see it thrive.

But Stewart says New York, like Sydney, is big and daring enough to take on a challenge, which is exactly why he thinks the fringe festival, to be staged in the inner west next month, will succeed. "Big cities don't feel like closed environments. They're very interested in what the next big project is."



Cracker ... Sydney Fringe festival director Kris Stewart (back) has a look at Dansatori's *Pistol Whipped*. Photo: Nick Moir

The next big thing in Sydney could be any one of the nearly 2000 artists about to descend on residents of Newtown, Marrickville, Leichhardt and Enmore.

Organisers originally envisaged 100 acts spread across theatre, dance, music, comedy, film and children's performances but the clamour from artists and venues to become involved soon saw that number reach 250, with as many turned away.

The Italian Forum in Leichhardt

that work to?" Stewart says. "You can't take that work to Cate Blanchett. What's the Sydney Dance Company going to do with it?"

"To a certain level, the point of a fringe is for artists and audiences to discover each other."

Previous fringe festivals in Bondi have fizzled but Stewart says the time and the place are now right, because it is no longer affordable for alternative artists to showcase their wares in Sydney.

"The same reason artists feel in

theatre. "It's quite silly, even though it's exploring betrayal and heartache, but it's constantly comedic," dancer Eva Craineum says (pictured above with red wings). "[The festival] is a fantastic opportunity to get our name out there," she says.

Comedian Zoe Kelly says she had regretted not taking better advantage of the performance space offered at her university before the festival came along, because the cost of staging a show is prohibitive.

"We've been doing it in Penny's lounge room and she doesn't have a bed so we've been rehearsing on her mattress," she says.

Her act, *Zoe and Penny's Very Short Attention Span*, will feature nuns that rap, a parody of Gen Y indie girls and inspirational speakers, with each skit separated by quick on-stage costume changes.

Organisers expect the festival to cost less than \$500,000 and hope to attract 100,000 people to its shows combined but even if the festival fails at both, it will be a memorable spectacle in the inner west to say the very least.

"What's the downside to putting on 200, 250, 300 acts?" Stewart says.

"What's the worst that can happen? Two thousand artists are going to get their shows up. There's nothing bad that comes out of it."

THE SYDNEY FRINGE
September 10-26, inner-west venues, 9550 3666, prices at www.thesydneyfringe.com.au

'What's the downside to putting on 200, 250, 300 acts? What's the worst that can happen?'

Kris Stewart

will give itself over to dancers, the Newtown School of Arts on Eliza Street will open its doors for the first time in a decade and iconic gay venue the Imperial Hotel will re-open to launch the festival and reassert itself as the home of drag.

There will be fine art, digital art, music, theatre and comedy but many performers defy classification, with singing acrobats, comic dancers and painting performers just as likely to bound out of their garages and lounge rooms as conventional drag queens and burlesque singers.

"A lot of works that were submitted sit outside traditional genres because who do you pitch

three independent Sydney artists present their solo works. Imogen Cranna, Cloe Fournier and Tanya Voges explore family relationships, light, darkness and chance using contemporary dance.

September 23-25, The Forum, Leichhardt, 9550 3666, \$20-\$24.

Music **Monica Goes to Rehab**

Monica Trapaga brings her favourite divas to life and examines their drug problems in a cabaret performance.

Accompanied by Elliott Wilshier on piano and with a martini in hand, she channels stars from Billie Holiday to Amy Winehouse. **September 15-16, Notes, Newtown, 9550 3666, \$20.**



Comedy **Sam Simmons - Fail**

Direct from the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Simmons claims he spent seven weeks

writing his show using only the light of a Nokia 3600 - with just one change of tracksuit

pants. **September 17-18, 21-25, CarriageWorks, Eveleigh, 9550 3666, \$30.**



Film and digital **Mobile Screenfest**

A screening of photographs and films shot entirely on mobile phones. Prizes worth \$10,000 are up for grabs for the winning films.

September 21, Factory Theatre, Marrickville, 9550 3666, \$16.50.

Kids **Caterpillars Can Fly**

A pantomime in English and Vietnamese about a little girl learning about life and the dangers of becoming a butterfly, involving puppetry, music and audience participation.

September 18, 19 and 25, The Newtown Theatre, St Peters, 9550 3666, \$15-\$24.