

Netting an audience

Entertainers turn to social networking sites to gain new fans

BY JULIE BEUN-CHOWN

With his weather-beaten Trilby hat, '50s hipster air and Jack Kerouac insouciance, Brendan McNally doesn't seem like a man with his finger on the pulse of technology.

From the top of his neatly combed Daddy-O hair to the tips of his well-worn Doc Martens, the Ottawa playwright looks like he avoided the Age of Internet and stayed stuck in the Age of Brylcreem. But looks can be deceiving.

With *Hey Bartender!*, his fourth play, being staged at this week's Ottawa

Fringe Festival, McNally has ditched traditional ways of attracting audiences and, like countless other local musicians and artists, is using social networking websites like Facebook and YouTube to get bums on seats.

Want to find out about the play before deciding whether to go? Visit ottawafringe.ca to watch a video of actors chanting the Bartender's Prayer. Or stay in the loop by joining the *Hey Bartender* Facebook group. You can even watch excerpts from the play on YouTube before it's even staged.

"The first time I put on a play at the Fringe Festival in 1999, I promoted it the typical way — made photocopies, typed up a press release and stapled notices everywhere. Seven people showed up," McNally recalls, grinning. "But I thought it was a success because I didn't know four of them."

This year, it's a different story. His focus is now less on attracting tradi-

tional media attention to promote his play — this article notwithstanding — and more on using the Internet to create a word-of-mouth buzz.

"Even two years ago, mainstream media was controlling the gates," he says. "They might still control the gates, and I still need them, but the walls have fallen down in the sense that now I can use social networking to directly access the public. Just with Facebook, I already have 186 members of the public interested in my play."

And McNally is not alone. Novelist Terry Fallis used podcasts to generate interest in his novel *The Best Laid Plans* after publishers turned up their noses. Fallis was recently awarded the 2008 Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour.

Hot young Montreal band Arcade Fire has reportedly used MySpace feedback to determine which songs

would work on an album. Locally, musicians and artists have blogged, Facebooked, Wikipedia'd and MySpaced their way to creating loyal audiences.

"It offers a million different ways to market yourself," says Ottawa folk musician Marc Charron (marccharronmusic.com), who has seen his national profile grow considerably since joining MySpace five years ago.

"In the past, I'd send a press release to promoters and hope for the best. Now, I send a link and it shows them (promoters) what they're purchasing. It's working really well."

Ditto local acts from the Bible All-Stars, the Cutmen and Kathleen Edwards to Jim Bryson and country-blues singer/songwriter John Allaire.

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Fringe: Quiet revolution

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"You get to know (other musicians) online, figure out if the match is good, build some out-of-town shows with them, and host them when they come to Ottawa," says Allaire, who has a website, e-newsletter, Facebook page and presence on YouTube. "That way, you get to feed off each other's audience and build a following in other markets."

It's a quiet revolution that's making plenty of noise, says Ben Watson, vice-president of marketing for Overlay.TV, an Ottawa startup soon to launch a revolutionary technology that will let users add links, comments and widgets to online videos. The mushroom effect of social networking has "significantly changed the rules of the game" when it comes to advertising, news and self-promotion, Watson says.

"With hundreds of freely available tools and sharing sites that are already built, it empowers everybody to become a content creator, publisher, pseu-

do journalist and online promoter."

Just where the future lies remains elusive, although the present has already developed some pitfalls. For one thing, social networking allows for some of the higher flights of posturing and false representation.

Far more insidious, however, is what Watson calls the "echo chamber," where information with little relevance — such as joke e-mails and pointless images — is endlessly repeated and forwarded. It takes a discerning user to determine the context and assess the value of such random messages, he says.

Even so, having the means to control your own publicity can be more blessing than curse, particularly for small, local promoters looking for an audience. "If you think about it, that (echo chamber) is where the power is," says Watson. "If Marshall McLuhan were on Facebook, he would say the medium isn't just the message, the medium is messages."

"And used correctly, intelligently, globally, locally and responsibly, this is more powerful than any form of advertising since the invention of print, radio and television."

Hey Bartender! has three more performances at the Ottawa Fringe Festival. For times and ticket prices, visit www.ottawafringe.com.

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