

# Waiting for the Curtain

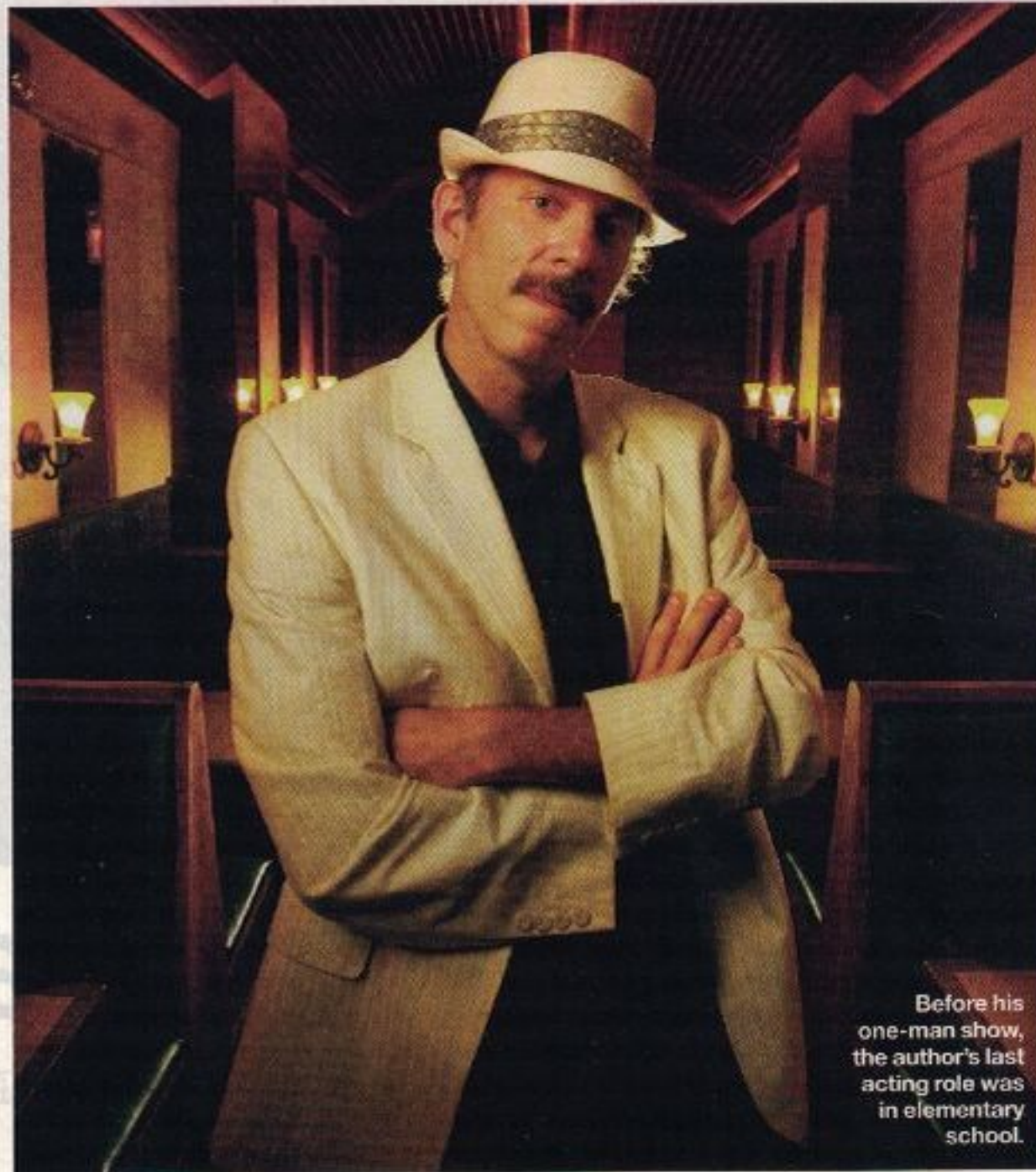
Being almost blind onstage and other theatrical adventures

**B**ackstage, I vow I'll never do this again. I'm 45. Sensible midlifers climb Kilimanjaro or go through ugly divorces; I've decided to write, direct, and perform a one-man play at the Capital Fringe Festival. My last role was a cockroach in elementary school. This time I'll be onstage for an hour playing two characters. Climb halfway up Kilimanjaro and you still get respect. But losing your place halfway through a solo performance is just mortifying.

The Fringe Festival started five years ago. Cofounder Julianne Brienza wanted a way for people in the local theater community to get to know one another. It operates on a first-come, first-served basis. "I hate the word 'uninjured,'" Brienza says. "But that's what Fringe is." As long as you meet the deadline and pay the \$575 fee, you qualify. No one reads your script, evaluates your actors, or questions your seriousness. You fill out a form naming your production needs. The staff assigns you a venue. For my play, *Krapp's Last PowerPoint*, about a scientific discovery gone awry, all I needed was a projection wall; I was given one of the few venues configured as a theater in the round. Fortunately, my production manager was a whiz at adapting the space.

Only one thing is scarier than doing a 60-minute monologue in a packed house: doing it in an empty house. Fringe audiences have a choice of more than 100 shows. They'll show up if they know you, get hooked by your title, or hear a recommendation. I had no name recognition. I prepared 2,000 postcards, a couple of flyers, a press release, and a Web page. Through Facebook and arm twisting, I nearly sold out opening night. On the list of advance sales, I saw a theater reviewer's name. Perhaps he liked the title. Perhaps he appreciated the press release that compared me with British singing phenom Susan Boyle.

As I wait for the curtain to rise, I hear the audience murmur. I tell myself that even if I screw up, the play has enough surprises to keep people entertained. There's the PowerPoint, a professional presentation designed by a friend. There are the questions from an audience plant—my wife. And the final flourish: a simulated power failure near the end that throws the audience into darkness and doubt.



Before his one-man show, the author's last acting role was in elementary school.

I've decided to ditch my glasses. This has drawbacks—I might trip—but I take the risk so I can perform in front of a blur. It's more reassuring than imagining the audience in underpants.

The stage manager gives the cue. I walk onstage and snap my fingers. The lights come up. I can barely see. The first words come out of my mouth.

The strangest part is the laughter—no one laughs when you're performing in the bathroom, and my wife stopped after the second run-through. I have to take it on faith the audience is laughing for the right reasons.

My friends enjoy the show, but I don't believe them any more than I believed my parents' evaluation of my cockroach perfor-

mance. It's the reviewer's opinion I want. Finally, it appears online. He likes it.

The rest of the run is relatively uneventful. I never get used to the tense minutes before curtain and never lose my fear of forgetting lines. The PowerPoint malfunctions on the final night and I have to ad-lib. But nothing compares to the terror of opening night. When it's all over, I say to my wife, "Never again."

Two weeks later, I'm mapping out another one-man show for 2010, and I'm upping the ante: three characters, 75 minutes.

This time I'll wear glasses. **VI**

John Feffer ([johnfeffer@gmail.com](mailto:johnfeffer@gmail.com)) performs his one-man show "Edible Rex" in this year's Capital Fringe Festival. The festival runs July 8 through 25.