The Adelaide Fringe has exceeded expectations this year. With box office takings topping $3m and ticket sales overtaking even the bumper season in 2002, the Festival’s unruly sibling is in the pink.

The overall figures mask disparities in audiences, though. Those long lines down Angas Street, out of the Nova on Rundle Street and the big mobs around the Scott Theatre were all for comedy acts. Some were worth the wait - the eccentric Daniel Kitson., Lano and Woodley’s hypermanic slapstick on The Island and the slowburn Dave Hughes. Others such as Brit Com-edy and the usually staunch Rod Quantock were not.

The Fringe, for all its claims to being the edgy alternative, frequently offers the safe ticket and the easy choice. Comedy rules at Fringe time, and that can make life hard for the theatre program. Theatre has its devotees but they are often a select few. Many companies played to depleted audiences and some of the interstate and international shows must surely have struggled to break even.

The first week is clearly the time to strike and the excellent Horse Country and Cincinnati were in and out before the Festival and Womad could start distracting the punters. Also in early was one of my favourites, UK act Peepolykus’s show, Mindbender. With Sidekick Bernard and not-very-subtle audience plant, Raymond, Michael Santos (aka David Sant) is the Mindbender, reaching into the audience to tell us - Raymond’s radio mike permitting - our names, addresses and our deepest thoughts. It was hilariously cheesy with mime gags, palm readings, lounge music, big jewellery and no-one will forget Bonko, the gypsy bear.

At the FringeHUB venue in the Adelaide Uni Union we saw a number of excellent shows over three weeks. Theatre Simple from Seattle served us well, particularly with Notes From Underground as did Fresh Track with Morph and Songs For the Deaf.

Aquarius Productions from Melbourne, distinguished themselves with Can’t Stand Up For Falling Down, a play from UK writer Richard...
Cameron about domestic violence and sexual bullying. Crisply directed by Jess Kingford and featuring Nicola Leona, Sharryn Oppy and Bernadette Schwerdt, it brings separate monologues into disturbing focus as three women reflect on their experiences with one man. It proved to be one of the best in the Fringe I saw this year.

The South Korean Theatre Company Nottle offered an unusual glimpse of physical theatre from Seoul with The Return, a work interpreting a Brecht poem about a soldier returning from war. Although derivative of just about every European and postmodern stylist from Marceau and Bausch to Lepage, the lyricism of the performances in The Return has stayed with me. Company Nottle - which translates as “field of labours” - worked hard for their meagre audiences, and after high profile appearances at European festivals must have been disappointed with their Fringe season.

X-Ray, written by Chris Tugwell and directed by Geoff Crowhurst was always going to be especially timely. Narrating a floodlit 24 hour day in the life of David Hicks at Guantanamo Bay and featuring Nathan O’Keefe as Hicks and James Edwards as his equally powerless marine prison guard, the work is as restrained as its subject. Carefully factual, it makes no effort to glorify Hicks but strongly presents the constitutional contradictions and illegality of his circumstance. Starkly reminding us that this is reality theatre, the production has been attended by Hicks’s father Terry, Stephen Kenny his lawyer and, in the final days of the season, his US-appointed military defense attorney also.

With works of this diversity on offer, the Fringe Theatre program has again accomplished much. I am sorry I missed out on Brink’s staging of The Caretaker, by all accounts a fine opportunity to see current work from this Adelaide company. Another casualty of the not-enough-nights-in-the-week problem was William Zappa’s self devised one man show Winter’s Discontent. The Fringe is an embarrassment of riches - on which we will be reflecting many times in the quiet months ahead.