



## MITF Producers Concoct Massive Midtown Fest

Written by Times Square Staff

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Given the eclectic lineup of this year's [Midtown International Theatre Festival](#), seeing some of the 40-plus new shows throughout midtown Manhattan may seem daunting. And the fact that many of New York's veteran performers and creators (such as Austin Pendleton) who are often seen under the bright lights of Broadway--can be found working in these very different, small productions in much more intimate festival settings.

The brainchild of **John Chatterton** (publisher and editor of [OOBR](#)--"the off-off-broadway review"), The Midtown International Theatre Festival (MITF) started as a way to present the finest Off-Off-Broadway talent during the summer. One of his OOBOR reviewers suggested that "someone" should start a Midtown theater festival. Eight seasons later, the Midtown International Theatre Festival (MITF) is still going strong.

Managing Producer **Emileena Pedigo** joined the festival four years ago and has been working alongside John ever since. In addition to the festival, she co-produced "The Merry Wives of Windsor" and "Sweet Love Adieu" in rep on Theatre Row with Oberon Theatre Ensemble for their 10th season, and 6 Figure's 14th Season at the West End Theatre.

Said Chatterton in his introductory comments:

*"Our philosophy is based on a paradoxical combination of selectivity and diversity. We select projects that are pleasing to us as well as to audiences. We also recognize that not all plays appeal to all audiences. We don't stuff the Festival with zany productions whose chief recommendation is a long title or one with "sex" in it.*

*"We encourage diversity because theatre itself is diverse. By diversity we don't mean political correctness; Shakespeare isn't politically correct by our standards, although he had to toe the political lines of his time. But we do encourage plays of all racial and sexual stripes, as well as plays in all genres."*

**Q: John, what made you want to start the Midtown International Theatre Festival eight years ago? Did you see a void in regular summer festivals?**

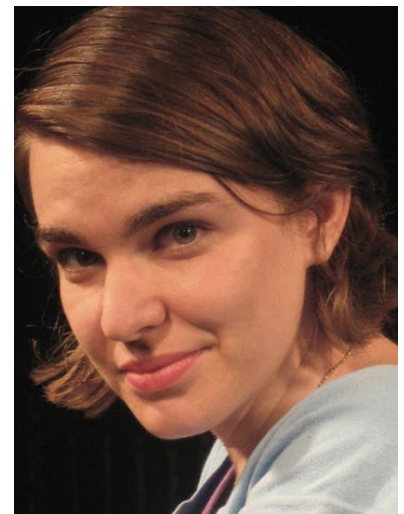
**John Chatterton:** I had been publishing [OOBR](#) ("The Off-Off-Broadway Review"), the only publication dedicated exclusively to Off-Off-Broadway, for several years when the Fringe [Festival, located primarily downtown] started. One of my writers suggested that "someone" should start a Midtown Fringe. Two years later, no one had, so I did. Though, not wanting to confuse people, I didn't call it the Fringe!

**Q. Emileena, you got involved with this festival four years ago and now you're the managing producer. What was your job like at the beginning and what's it like now, after all this time?**

**Emileena Pedigo:** This is my fourth year working on the festival, and I have always found it a pleasure working alongside [the MITF team]. I started as a Venue Manager, seeking stage management experience in New York City—I was living in Chicago at the time working as a Stage Manager, though I am originally from the California Bay Area.

Now I basically run all operations for the festival: contracts, schedules, technical logistics, hiring staff, and basically catching everything that might fall through the cracks—which is still a lot like Stage Management!

John's been an incredible mentor—he created and built a strong foundation for a theatre festival



MITF Managing producer Emileena Pedigo believes there are more must-see shows this year than ever before

in midtown NYC! And I believe I've helped take the festival progress a few steps forward by creating new ways of managing operations: i.e. creating a bigger staff, establishing festival policies and procedures, and more that has allowed the festival to grow and the reputation to expand.

**Q: What is it that the Midtown area—excluding the big Broadway playhouses—has to offer theater in New York? Does the neighborhood inform any of your picks for presentation?**

**JC:** We're just around the corner from the Paramount Building, so we're handy for industry to come and see shows. We're also just out of the tunnel for New Jersey-ites and really convenient for people coming from Queens to Penn Station or Times Square. All of these conditions suggest that we take a more commercial, middle-of-the-road approach to our shows.

I enjoy experimental shows as much as anyone—though if they're too experimental they present technical issues in the barebones Festival format—but they don't seem to thrive in our environment as much as more accessible work. This year especially we have more work by people from Broadway, which is tremendously exciting.

**Q: You make a point of the festival being a hotbed for fresh talent. What makes MITF so good for small companies and new playwrights--and are you thinking of expanding that scope ever?**

**EP:** MITF is a great place to test drive a new script. The festival provides a friendly and supportive atmosphere in which to produce quality work and have it seen by a vast expanse of audiences, many of which come from, or who are themselves, other festival participants.

**JC:** I love new plays and small companies—they're the bread and butter of Off-Off-Broadway theatre. Though personally I miss some of the revivals we used to do—Beckett, Shakespeare, Shaw. I'm considering adding an artistic director whose job will be to unearth classical companies and revivals.

**Q: We just did an interview with Austin Pendleton, who's directing a play for you, "The Speed Queen." And other notable Broadway presences—even backstage personalities—are in your plays as well. Is this what the 10:30 showings are all about? [Several of the MITF's shows have late night curtains, ostensibly so Broadway buddies can come see their friends after performing their own shows]**

**EP:** While bringing Broadway personalities out to smaller venues is Midtown in not what we're all about, we have found that MITF is an excellent vehicle for them to produce on a different level. We have participating in this year's festival two Broadway playwrights, both producing on the Workshop Mainstage: Bill Nabel (who wrote the book and lyrics for the musical "Take Me America," with music by Bob Christianson), currently appearing in "Beauty and the Beast;" and Craig Jacobs (who wrote "To The Contrary") has been production stage managing "Phantom of the Opera" for years.

Other shows have actors who have been on Broadway multiple times (and even Ron Palillo, of "Welcome Back Kotter" fame, appearing in "I'm in Love With Your Wife" at the Workshop Jewel Box Theatre) who are eager to come to Midtown to showcase really great plays. It is an opportunity for these artists to work on material they love on a scale that is more oriented toward the script as opposed to big production values, after all, it is a festival setting, and our rules prohibit big set pieces and fancy lighting.

An interesting logistical issue for us was scheduling around those currently in Broadway shows.

Both "Take Me America" and "To The Contrary" are running at off-hours, usually late nights, to allow for artists running from their show on Broadway to perform...again!

**Q: Were there any other unexpected perks to having a bit of participation from Broadway?**

**EP:** Well, another interesting thing that these shows have spurred are donations. Two shows, "To The Contrary", on the Workshop Mainstage and "Out of the Flames," in Where Eagles Dare Theatre are donating partial, if not all, of their profits to [Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS](#).

**Q. That's great! So now that the work is nearly done, which shows are you personally going to see the opening night of?**

**EP:** Yikes...as many as I can. My hands are usually full during the running of the festival, but I plan on seeing as many shows as I can. And there are more shows this year that I really want to see than in previous years!

**JC:** As Executive Producer, I stay above the fray and don't play favorites. But this year I plan to see EVERY play in the Festival. You couldn't tear me away!



Credit: photo by Tom Lau/Loud & Clear Media, Inc.

Respected Broadway actors, such as Austin Pendleton (above), regard the MITF as an opportunity to workshop new ideas on a more intimate scale