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First Person Festival, a singular sensation

In nine years, it has become a weeklong extravaganza of the autobiographical arts.

By Wendy Rosenfield
For The Inquirer

During the nine years of its existence, this week's First Person Festival of Memoir and Documentary Art - with its lectures, film screenings, gallery exhibitions, and now even a First Person Museum of treasured objects - has seen the form take on a life of its own. From the personal philosophies of Jersey juiceheads to your friends' Facebook status updates, it's all me, all the time, everywhere you look.

So why pay for the privilege of hearing even more about someone else in person? Robin Gelfenbien of *My Salvation Has a First Name: A Wiernmobile Journey* - a "multimedia extravaganza" about her year driving Oscar Mayer's ubiquitous mobile hot dog - makes a good case. "It's a lot easier to share (and overshare) a story online than face to face." However, she continues, "We're surrounded by so much pointless entertainment that when someone stands on stage and is honest about his or her life, people find it refreshing and genuinely connect to it."

New Yorker Gelfenbien is one of two theater artists highlighting the festival (which began Monday and ends Sunday with a celebration of poet Sonia Sanchez) as part of First Person Raw, a new series featuring emerging artists. She performs Friday and Saturday at the festival's headquarters, Painted Bride Art Center, as does the other, Philadelphian Justin Jain.

Jain is a Philly Fringe favorite whose *shiFu/transFer* also breaks from the festival's typical podium-and-monologue setup, using an experimental, nonlinear format and four well-known area actors (James Ijames, Leah Walton, Scott McPheeters and Genevieve Perrier) to ask, "What does it mean to be an American?" A first-generation Filipino American, he stages the piece in the round, asking the audience "to constantly shift perspective, adjust to new rules, and assimilate to the moment at hand," challenges, he says, that are "staples" of life in the United States.

Jain and Gelfenbien represent this year's move toward more theater-based performance for the festival, a change Vicki Solot, First Person Arts' executive director, says she's always hoped for. "It's costly," she explains. "We're not in a position at all to mount a *Laramie Project*" - Moises Kaufman's documentary drama about the murder of gay student Matthew Shepard - "so that puts us in presentation of solo theater, and frankly, a lot of it isn't that good."