

Festival Frolics

My first visit to the Edinburgh festival had nothing whatsoever to do with art though it did have a little to do with aesthetics; I was young and suffering from a lingering infatuation with an exotic dark-eyed...well, let's just call her *the girl*. The Girl lived in Edinburgh; I lived near Glasgow and I decided, rather than suffer in gloomy, love-lorn isolation, to head up to the 'Athens of the north' for the day and wander round the streets in the hopelessly optimistic belief that I would somehow bump into the object of my affection. Even at two decades remove and with my naivety and youthfulness taken into consideration this still seems pretty desperate, and makes me cringe with embarrassment even as I write this - I didn't even know in which part of Edinburgh she lived! But I went, drifted around forlornly, dodging jugglers and mime artists, pipers and pamphleteers, all the while scanning the faces in the crowds for a glimpse of *those eyes*.

Towards the end of a long and inevitably fruitless day I made my way back to Waverley station, entered the bar and ordered a whisky to console me through the last few moments before home time. With 10 minutes to go before my train back to Glasgow was due to depart, something made me glance up at the door - there she was, standing there like an apparition, those eyes staring straight at me. She smiled her smile, shouted my name and ran towards me arms outstretched.....

I mention all this only to illustrate that Edinburgh, birthplace of Harry Potter, is a magical place, and never more so than in August, when the population doubles and the city is overrun with an army of performers and festival fans for an intense three weeks of music, dance, theatre, comedy, more comedy and whatever else can be plausibly presented as entertainment worthy of a modest entrance fee.

The Edinburgh festival began over 70 years ago and started out with the lofty and serious aim of 'cheering people up' after the Second World War. It gave birth to a child, the festival fringe, a showcase for less-established and more experimental performances, which grew rapidly until it dwarfed its parent and now stands as the world's biggest art festival. The original, 'official festival', with its world famous artistes and internationally renowned companies soon found itself competing for the public's attention with its unruly offspring and they endured an uneasy relationship until reconciling in the early 70s. Since then the two have pooled resources and coexisted quite happily and with tremendous success.

Despite its phenomenal popularity, it should be noted that not everyone is an unqualified fan of the festival and its preternatural growth, and some people have commented that it has ballooned to an unmanageable size: *'there are more people in it than watching it'* remarked comedienne Victoria Wood. This is not, in fact, statistically accurate but it's not such a crazy exaggeration either - the festival attracts around 20,000 performers in around 2000 separate shows and sells just under 2,000,000 tickets.

Quality is an issue too, the 'creative anarchy' of the fringe means that some of what is on offer is, to put it bluntly, dross. Still, it's all part of the fun and with a few sensible precautions – read the reviews in the 'festival bible' *The Scotsman*, attend some of the free taster sessions *'The best of the fest'* and take advantage of the numerous two-for-one show deals on offer and you should be able to minimize your chances of witnessing a festival flop; though, to be honest, some of the worst shows can also be the most entertaining.

This year's line-up in the serious festival has an Asian theme with dance from China and Korea, King Lear in Mandarin (!) and a dramatized version of Haruki Murakami's 'The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle'. Alongside these refined offerings will be the useful mad-cap nonsense from the legions of stand up comics that descend on the city like so many prospectors in search of gold, available each year in the form of a top comedy prize and a subsequent TV contract.

Don't hesitate then, head up to Edinburgh and enjoy all that this fine city has to offer at this special time of the year, though I would advise you to travel with slightly more realistic expectations than I did on my first visit. Finally, if you are at all curious as to what happened next with the girl in the bar, I'm afraid I am saving it for my memoirs.

I will say one thing though – I didn't catch that train.

<http://www.edinburghfestivals.co.uk/festivals/fringe>