

## Edinburgh Festival - The biggest arts festival of all

### What is the story?

A shouted warning for the audience to stand back and a burst of fire from a human flame-thrower surges towards the crowd of onlookers on the Mound. A troupe in silver body-paint hands out leaflets for the night's performance. Down the High Street, a jazz band bangs out the sounds of New Orleans. It is clamour, clamour - 'come and see us, the most brilliant act ever' - as every group of talent demands your attention. For it is August in Edinburgh and the prim grey capital of Scotland is once again home to the largest arts show in the world.

As the International Festival guide puts it: 'There is no place on earth like Edinburgh in August.'

Nothing, but nothing, prepares the first-time visitor for the scale of what is on offer. You could in theory set to work every morning at ten, jam-pack the day with visits to shows and go all the way through the wee hours to 4am - and still see only a tiny fraction of what is available. There are more shows, more world premieres, more tickets, more new talent, more critics, more media moguls, more authors and playwrights — in short more talent on display — than at any other arts festival anywhere. What have Rupert Murdoch, Billy Connolly and J. K. Rowling got in common? They have all, in one way or another, appeared on a stage in Edinburgh in August.

In fact, so, too, has just about everyone involved in the British arts or media scene. Every student theatre troupe in the land wants to put something on there; a dear friend commissioned a new piano composition that had its world premiere there; other friends have done book readings or shows; one of my cousins puts on or acts in a play there most years ... and my own modest contribution was once to go on stage as a panellist for a TV event.

20 There is a host of other arts festivals around the world but Edinburgh is three times the size of any of them. It is an extraordinary, if improbable achievement - and one that many other cities would love to emulate. How has Edinburgh done it?

The short answer is slowly. This is not one festival but - depending what you include - ten. Each reinforces the others, giving the city an artistic critical mass that makes it impossible to topple.

There is the original arts festival, organized like so many others by the city authorities. There is a jazz and blues festival, Europe's largest, bringing in groups from all over the world. There is the book fair, the largest of its kind on the planet. There is a film festival, the longest continually running one in the world, for Cannes had a break during the Second World War. There is a television festival. In 2003, a video games festival joined the clutch; Scotland is one of the key world centres for creating new video games. There is the Mela, a celebration of life in the Indian sub-continent, run by Edinburgh's Asian community. In 2004 the city added a visual art festival for the first time, though actually modern visual arts had been celebrated since the early years, with local galleries putting on individual shows. In a slightly different category from all the rest, there is the Edinburgh Tattoo, where military musicians — again from all over the world — put on a show on the forecourt of Edinburgh Castle. The Tattoo is actually the second-largest of all the shows in terms of ticket sales, offering more than 200,000 seats through its three-week run, and military visitors come from all over the world to see how it is done.

And the biggest of all? That honour goes to the Fringe. Edinburgh's special feature, the thing that distinguishes it from every other celebration of artistic endeavour, is the Fringe - the open access given by the city to the thousands of events that take place in August. Others have tried to copy it. None has really succeeded.

40 The story, though, offers a lesson for anyone wanting to run an arts event. Back in that drab aftermath of the Second World War, many cities sought to recapture the life and joy of pre-war Europe. Thus Cannes restarted its film festival - it had opened for just one night, on 1 September 1939, before Europe was plunged into war. In 1946 and 1947, respectively, Avignon and Edinburgh both started arts festivals<sup>15</sup> - the pattern being the classic one where a group of civil and artistic leaders invite companies to bring their acts, organize venues — and usually offer subsidies to get them to come. The original Edinburgh International Arts Festival was exactly that. But in the very first year something happened that changed Edinburgh and the arts world for ever.

Eight groups that had not been invited, six from Scotland and two from England, decided to gatecrash the show. They found their own venues, stumped up their own money and put on a performance." That first Fringe has defined the movement ever since: no performers are invited — there is complete open access; they use unconventional theatres; and they carry all the financial risks themselves. More came the following year and an Edinburgh journalist pointed out that interesting things were happening on the fringe of the main festival — and so coined that expression to describe them.'

Since then, the Fringe has gradually acquired a modest infrastructure. The first programme to bring the various independent acts under one loose umbrella, rather than have them compete against each other for spectators,<sup>18</sup> was put together on the initiative of a local printer in 1954. A box office run by Edinburgh students followed in 1955 and the Festival Fringe Society in 1958. One of the key aims of the society was to help would-be performers put on shows, a theme that continues to today. The event became famous across the UK in 1960 after the success of the comedy show *Beyond the Fringe* (ironically part of the main festival, not the Fringe), but the first full-time paid employee was not appointed until 1969.

60 The Fringe raced on, getting into the Guinness Book of Records as the globe's largest arts festival in 1992 and becoming the first arts organization in the world to sell tickets online in real time in 2000. In 2009 an estimated 19,000 performers took part in more than 34,000 performances at more than 2,000 shows in 265 venues. Nearly 1.9 million tickets were sold and the event generated £75 million for the economy. Those figures beat all records by a huge margin. Indeed the Fringe had doubled in size over the previous six years.

Then finally there are the shows that are literally 'Beyond the Fringe'. The Fringe is an enabling organization that aims to help would-be performers. No one needs to use its services to put on a show, though, in practice, it makes life easier to go through the central ticket office and benefit from the publicity associated with the Fringe programme. But lots of performers simply turn up. Most busk in the High Street or on the Mound, the public space by the National Gallery of Scotland, but some simply put on a show in friends' flats. You may not get noticed by the critics, but if you want the experience of performing before a huge and interested audience, Edinburgh provides the ultimate opportunity. Edinburgh in August is the world's stage and anyone, but anyone, can be a player.

But how? How has one medium-sized city managed to achieve this position? To relate the chronology helps explain a little, for the burst of energy that the Fringe brought from day one has been the catalyst driving the growth of the other elements of the festival. Critical mass matters. Once the Fringe was established as the premier showcase for British, later world, theatrical talent, it was natural that Edinburgh in August should attract other festivals too. The market was largely ready-made, for people who are interested in new experimental theatre are probably also interested in more conventional drama, in classical music and jazz, in new books - in all the other experiences that Edinburgh offers. But Edinburgh is not just a retail show for interested individuals; it is a wholesale show for the different artistic trades. For a young performer to get noticed at Edinburgh can be a life-changing experience. Win one of the top awards and nothing will ever be the same again.

80 So for the (mostly) youthful performers and producers at the Fringe, it is a career tool. 'I am here,' a friend who put on a show there explained, 'to invest in my future.' And for the more mature critics and impresarios, as well as the ordinary punters, it is 'the chance to see it before it happens'.

### ***What are the lessons?***

Edinburgh has long had a lot of things going for it — things that would naturally make it the ideal backdrop for an arts and entertainment festival. It is, physically, the most beautiful city in Britain, with its castle, its gardens, its medieval Old Town and its Georgian squares. It is a capital city and - important in the entertainment world - an English-speaking one. But none of this, of course, would have been enough. There are at least three special features about the Edinburgh Festival that carry a message for other cities seeking to develop their own special face to the world.

Lesson one is the willingness to create and permit a completely open marketplace. This means accepting that what happens cannot be controlled. Edinburgh has tended this marketplace wisely, not by piling in huge amounts of money or building infrastructure, but rather by clearing bureaucratic blockages that might stifle it. For example, one of the keys to the Fringe's success is the use of unconventional performance spaces, often in old buildings designed for another purpose." That means applying sensitive fire and access regulations - to make sure audiences really are safe - rather than insisting that venues fit box-ticking requirements.

100 It also means accepting that the city will, for one month, be a quite different place from what it is during the rest of the year. Residents and businesses alike in effect lose control of the centre of their city. It is business, of course, but it is also disruption. Were it badly managed, the disruption could damage the core activities that drive the city through the rest of the year. All tourist centres have to cope to some extent with surges of visitors with different values to the locals, but this is extreme stuff. The lesson therefore is not just to permit the creation of a market but also to relish it.

Lesson two is to blend top-down and bottom-up. There is no single mind planning what happens in Edinburgh; there are and always have been lots of minds, which work in different ways. Some of these, such as the director and governing body of the International Festival, have to exert a top-down discipline. The companies performing have to be invited. Funding has to be found, venues secured and the events publicized. To get the right mix, there has to be some artistic direction.

At the Fringe, by contrast, the minds have to focus almost exclusively on logistics. They do not concern themselves about the artistic merit of the performers; all they have to do is make sure that anyone who fills the basic requirements is able to set up a show, for this is entirely a bottom-up exercise. There is, however, one crucial junction that the Fringe performs beyond logistics. This is teaching.

Every year it holds a series of seminars to show would-be performers and promoters how to put on a show. These include: how much the different venues will cost; how to manage publicity; the timescale for decisions; the need to go for as long a run as possible to cover costs, and so on. It is in the interests of everyone that people go into the project aware of the costs and how to budget for them. Even performers have to eat.

The trick, which the various organizers of the Edinburgh festivals have managed to pull off, is to achieve balance — to plan but not to over-plan, to lead but also to follow the demands of the market.

That leads to the third lesson: the need to listen. This has been central to Edinburgh's development at three stages.

120 First, what started as a conventional arts festival, and might have remained so, was swiftly transformed by the demands of the market into something much bigger. Had there been no uninvited guests at the first party, the Fringe might never have taken off.

Second, in the middle years, Edinburgh allowed market forces to develop the Fringe, rather than trying to stifle it. Technically, the Fringe has become extremely innovative, from the first comprehensive programme to the centralized ticket office and, later, to internet booking.

Third, whenever a new festival wanted to tag along, it was welcomed. So films and TV, jazz and books were all grafted onto the official and Fringe core. This tradition continued into 2004 with the formal addition of the art festival - though as I noted earlier, the visual arts had been represented at Edinburgh for many years in an informal way.

By chance, on a visit to the festival in 2007, I met the key person in bringing modern visual arts to Edinburgh - a man called Richard Demarco, who grabbed me by the arm and taught me something else. A tiny, mercurial Italian Scot in his late seventies, he had gone as a 17-year-old to the very first festival - and been so enchanted that he decided to devote his life to bringing art to Edinburgh.

And so over the years a string of European and Scottish artists had their works exhibited in Edinburgh at Richard Demarco's gallery, and in 2007 his archive was put on display at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Queen Street. It was an amazing jumble of stuff, bringing together the work of renowned artists such as Joseph Beuys and Richard Demarco's role in the whole festival scene. (He had, for example, co-founded the Traverse Theatre in 1963.)

140 As we talked, two things became clear — two things at the core of the spirit of Edinburgh. One is that it is vital for the different aspects of art to commingle; theatre should not be separate from the visual arts — it is all part of the whole. And, of course, Edinburgh mixes everything together. The other is that you need failure; people need to be free to fail. Richard Demarco himself always maintains that he set out on his career in the arts because he had failed his exams at school, but the point is much bigger.

What I think Edinburgh does is to create a platform not just where people can feel free to experiment but also one where they do not need to worry if it does not work. There is surely a wider message there: individual failure is an essential part of the wider success of almost all enterprises - and absolutely to a venture as huge and amorphous as the Edinburgh Festival.

- Create an open marketplace
- Blend top-down and bottom-up
- Listen - and accept failure as part of wider success

### ***What could go wrong?***

Nothing is for ever but the sheer size and variety of the talent on display in Edinburgh gives it a stability that other arts festivals lack. Because it is market-driven, it cannot be snuffed out by a squeeze on funding; as long as it provides a useful showcase function for the entertainment industries, it will survive. If you were trying to create a new venue for putting talent in the shop window, you would not invent Edinburgh, but it is there, it is huge and it would be hard to displace. Critical mass matters.

160 But so, too, does efficiency. In 2008 the film festival moved its timing forward to May, thereby getting the city to itself. This decision was largely due to the global film calendar - a case of trying to fit in between Cannes, Venice and Toronto' — but the sheer congestion of Edinburgh in August was apparently a factor too. That year the Fringe booking system broke down and ticket numbers were down year-on-year, though they recovered spectacularly in 2009.

Thus the main threat is not that all the new shows will suddenly up sticks and decamp to New York, London — or Hollywood, rather it is that the festival will become an inefficient showcase, making it hard for the talent-spotters to find what they want and for the best shows to gain their attention.

It may become too big for its own good. This is not principally a matter of logistics — though the city needs to think more innovatively about the way in which it manages the weight of visitors - but of marrying the needs of the ordinary public, who largely fund the whole show, with the needs of the industries that use it to show their wares. If it becomes inefficient for the professionals and they find other ways of locating the new performers, then the city loses a crucial element of its importance.

At a popular level that might hardly be noticed; the more punters who come, the more the market will create stuff to entertain them. The retail trade would continue unchecked, at least for a while. But if Edinburgh were ever to lose its edge - if, for example, the new comedians started to test their acts elsewhere - then after a while the public would begin to notice.

There is an element of danger about Edinburgh in August; not physical danger, of course, for there is remarkably little crime given the number of people. No, it is artistic danger. Alongside the possibility, even probability, of seeing the new stars before they are famous, there is the certainty of seeing some poor hopefuls tank, embarrass themselves and their audience, and disappear from the entertainment world for ever. From the point of view of the visitor, the cost is a wasted afternoon or evening of leisure time. From the point of view of the critic, the cost is higher: it is not seeing something of greater merit elsewhere. From the point of view of the performer, it may simply become better to bypass Edinburgh and find other ways of making your talent known.

180 There has been a little evidence of this in recent years. The danger sign is key critics not turning up or only going for a couple of days. This is not yet a serious problem but you can see some cracks in the facade. The number of tickets sold is wonderful but some say that the essential edge - the artistic danger - may not be quite as sharp as it used to be. The Fringe is the key here. If ever the word gets round that it is on the skids then, well, the festival could implode.

First, Edinburgh would cease to be as important as a trade fair, or rather a set of trade fairs. The professionals would no longer attend.

Instead, they would find some other place where cutting-edge performers would test their acts on audiences and the critics could gauge their talents. Next, the public would become a different, less experimental audience, seeking entertainment that was more conventional, more 'commercial', more downmarket. Then after a while numbers both of performances and attendees would start to fall and the trouble would become obvious to the world.

Now I think this danger is quite small because every year the artistic focus shifts as demand for different types of artistic experience waxes and wanes. In recent years there has probably been an excess of stand-up comedians, as Richard Demarco complained, though that reflected a demand from the somewhat cynical early 2000s. But there were also a number of religious-themed events - something that reflects society's changing values and would not have happened ten years earlier. There was much about Christianity, as you might expect from the home of the Church of Scotland, mostly questioning it but also celebrating its musical traditions. There was everything from early Christian music in pretty early Christian churches to the Soweto Clospcl Choir. There were also a Yiddish song project, Buddhist tutorials and a small Islam festival, which featured Arab calligraphy, talks and music at the Edinburgh Central Mosque.

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Edinburgh has a great plus in its organization in that there is not and never has been a single mind running the show. So there is little danger of the city taking a decision that would undermine the festival phenomenon. But this also means that were, for whatever reason, the movement to lose its edge, it would be hard for the city to do much to recover it. Edinburgh sings to Mao's dictum 'Let one thousand flowers bloom', rather than his policy of Cultural Revolution. There is no mind to mess things up, but equally there is no mind to sort things out.

As well as being the biggest set of arts festivals in the world, Edinburgh is also the most commercial in two senses. One is that it receives less of a subsidy proportionate to its size than any festival anywhere;<sup>28</sup> arguably it subsidizes the city as a whole, for the additional revenue it brings in is far greater than the modest municipal contribution it receives. The other is that because it is completely open access, it gives an early signal of what the market for artistic or creative endeavour is seeking, hence the growth of religious events noted above. It has prospered because it both fills a market need and has a sense of mission to be the greatest show anywhere.

The chances are it will carry on doing so. However, tastes change in the worlds of arts and entertainment as much as in other areas of human endeavour.

So far, Edinburgh seems to have caught the fickle shifts of fashion and retained its lead. Long may it continue to do so. Meanwhile, anyone in the world who is interested in the arts should have at least one shot at braving the cacophony on the High Street of Edinburgh one August. Go to ten shows in a day and stagger back to the hotel battered and ready for some more tomorrow. Better still, put on one: back some students or even commission some music and give it a world premiere.

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At some stage the ever-greater size of the festival will become a more serious obstacle. Maybe the re-timing of the film festival carries a warning here - it cannot go on growing for ever and the switch from its present very big bang to some sort of steady state will be tricky. But for years to come it will remain, quite simply, the greatest show on earth.