

Art with No Heart

on corporate sponsorship of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival

By Helen Moore

(A version of this article was first published in 'The Scotsman' in September 2002)

For those who can afford it, it's undeniable that the Edinburgh Festival is still an incredible experience. The Fringe in particular is a dizzying merry-go-round of British and international talent, diversity and originality. As a writer who has lived in Edinburgh for eight years now, I always enjoy the injection of culture that the city experiences each year, and am often left feeling deeply moved and inspired by the few shows I'm privileged enough to afford to see.

However, I'm simultaneously aware of the less festive aspects of our annual extravaganza. The mysterious disappearing act of the homeless from our city streets. The rocketing costs of tickets for the Fringe shows that take place within private venues. The exclusivity of the Festival to those consumers who can afford or have the ability to access it. The fact that many Edinburgh residents, especially those living outwith the city centre in more socially and economically deprived areas, are left untouched by it. Even the supposedly more alternative Fringe Festival doesn't reach out into these communities in any shape or form. And increasingly year on year I hear the comment - from local residents and tourists alike - that the true spirit of festival is leaving the city's streets.

But what is this 'true spirit'? In my mind, first and foremost, it lies in that which fills and spills into public space, where at least potentially it's open to all to participate or spectate, no matter their social or economic background. Like many folk I know, I enjoy witnessing the transformation of our stony-grey streets into vibrant show-grounds. I love the fact that during the festival even as I'm going about my daily life, I'm likely to stumble across an impromptu fire juggler or a group of Mexican musicians and find myself swept up in the arms of unexpected entertainment.

Traditionally, our streets have been the site of popular ritual, performance, exchange. In my mind's eye, history's colourful tapestry of carnival, processions, meeting, exchange, informal trade weaves its way over Edinburgh's old cobble-stone streets. Whenever I consider the spirit of 'festival', I recall the exuberant expression I've experienced or know of from diverse cultures: the bizarre 'Burry Man' of Edinburgh's South Queensferry; Beltane fires throughout Scotland; carnival in Venice, Rio, Notting Hill; bull-running in Pamplona; foreign flea-markets; Seville's Easter processions: orange-throwing on Italian streets at harvest time. For me, all of these events belong to the popular tradition of celebration, of public expression. They are events of the people for the people, and have colour, vitality, spontaneity, even some degree of personal risk in being involved.

Street performance doubtless belongs to this popular tradition. Characterised by spontaneity and fluidity, it derives from circus and carnival traditions. And operating outside the parameters of today's Neoliberal market, it's popular art that's based on an exchange of energy - the performer's skill for the audience's attention, with money offered voluntarily on the basis of the recognition of that exchange, and also as sign of appreciation of the performer's talent. Street traders may also belong to this tradition. Freed of the constraints and expense of shop overheads, they are often young artists

and craftspeople finding their route to expression and selling original artwork at low prices, thereby adding to the colour and diversity of the festival spirit.

And yet why are so many people feeling that this spirit is losing ground in the city reputed to be the Festival City? In the city which boasts an array of festivals throughout the year? As I see it, the reasons lie quite largely with the policies of the City Council and the Fringe management and are themselves, at times, a reflection of the wider culture in which we currently live.

It is beyond question that some responsibility for the management of public space lies with any city council. The maintenance, street-cleaning, road repairs, protection of public from falling masonry – in short, public health and safety. Yet the sharply increasing extension of bureaucratic control in the name of public health and safety is something that many people are complaining of both in Edinburgh and in Britain as a whole.

In June, I attended a craft workshop (traditional rag-rug making) at the 'Treefest' in the city's Inverleith Park. The woman leading it complained to me of how she'd had to complete a lengthy risk assessment in order to gain permission to hold the workshop. This was granted but on the understanding that participants could only use blunt scissors, to avoid the risk of cutting themselves. And during this year's Fringe, I heard that face-painting on the Royal Mile was stopped due to fears about the possible toxicity of the paints.

To me, these kinds of instances are ridiculous. Most of all I resent the way in which licensing authorities seem to want to remove my ability to exercise personal responsibility and decide what degree of risk I am capable of dealing with. But this paternalism is not limited to our city alone. Ultimately, it is symptomatic of a phenomenon spreading from the United States caused by the fear of litigation following accidents in public space and the subsequent cost of successful claims.

Often people say that reducing risk prevents spending from the public purse. In fact this kind of bureaucratic control costs, not only financially, but also, I believe, in the kind of bland, homogenised culture it creates, which takes away from the true spirit of festival. Regulations are made to be enforced. And within the arts, if there is little money available from local or state government to support events, then organising bodies will turn increasingly to corporate sponsorship to cope. In the case of the Fringe, bureaucratic control going hand-in-hand with corporate sponsorship has become a more and more unwelcome feature.

This year many people commented that the Royal Mile appeared to no longer belong to the people of Edinburgh, but to the Royal Bank of Scotland. Their advertising adorned litter-bins and the mini stages on which many street performers are now given set times to perform. Admittedly the permits that the Fringe office handed out were free. But they allowed for a performance time of 20 minutes for a small act, 45 for a larger one, and at the same time each day, with a complete curfew at 8.30pm because of fears of disturbance to local residents. For many street performers I have spoken to, this is utterly opposed to the spirit of spontaneity and fluidity with which they need to operate. A good few said they won't bother to return. And for hundreds of tourists and Edinburgh residents it has created an atmosphere of inauthenticity on the streets.

This control of street performers is justified by the Fringe organisers who say it's a fairer system because it gives everyone a turn. But in the past, when the Mound was a free-spirited space for traders and performers, and for locals and visitors was the heart of the festival, performers were known to organise amongst themselves. Additionally, the Fringe office cites the concerns of local residents about noisy streets in the later

evening. But with this reasoning, there seems to be a blatant hypocrisy at work in the city. I live right behind the castle and every night have to endure loud fireworks as late as 11pm at the Military Tattoo, plus vast convoys of coaches around the adjacent streets, and crowds blocking the pavement all down the Lawnmarket. But of course, even though this event is to some residents a distasteful display of military power, because it's a huge tourist attraction and a giant money-spinner, such concerns as local residents such as I may have about noise and traffic are waived aside.

"Fringe Benefits from the Royal Bank of Scotland" was the ubiquitous slogan on the Royal Mile this year. But these benefits are for the bank, it would seem, not for the people of Edinburgh or overseas visitors. Generously the bank sponsored 'Rubbish Busters' to take care of the litter generated along the Mile. But in talking to a group of 3 of them, all university students and all wearing t-shirts with bank logos, I discovered they are being paid £6 per hour to work from 10am till 8pm, although their job mainly entailed "standing around and being seen", as one put it. Although they didn't want to be identified, they openly admitted that they'd been told not to walk up and down picking litter, but to do it in one area and to remain there even once it was clear. "It's a bit of a PR exercise," said another.

Corporate sponsorship often seems to go hand-in-hand with the erosion of the freedom to celebrate or practise art in an authentic way, perhaps because it creates another master to answer to. Perhaps of all those affected this year, street artists and traders seem to have come off the worst under the current Fringe management. Since the loss of the Mound site, due to conservation work on the National Galleries, market stalls have been situated in Parliament Square. Traders there told me that within the last 3 years since the relocation, the cost of a stall for 3 weeks during the festival has risen from £120 to £700. Licences also have to be applied for in March. This has many implications. Firstly, traders have to be selling sufficiently expensive goods to recoup such a huge outlay for a stall, thus ruling out many young, local artists and craftspeople. It also means that traders arriving from abroad, unaware of the need to get a licence so far ahead of time, are unable to participate. In some cases they have had to turn round and return home. This year two such cases were brought to my attention: some Peruvian craftspeople wishing to sell their hand-made jewellery obtained no licence and a group from a women workers' co-operative from the Himalayas in India were also unable to sell their natural, handmade crafts. And deprived of both local and international diversity, for visitors to the market what mostly remained on the market stalls were expensive and derivative Charles Rennie Mackintosh style mirrors or fay watercolour prints of the city.

"Follow the money: public spaces where people gather are privatised for profit. The result is a "blandification" of countless urban geographies," write Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (in 'From ACT UP to the WTO – urban protest and community building in the era of globalisation') about a similar phenomenon in America. Everywhere I went during this year's festival, I saw countless examples of corporate advertising emblazoned across our public space. Even though the Peruvians had to go home empty-handed, when the sunny weather began, Starbucks were suddenly given permission to do a massive promotion on the Royal Mile. And to our city's shame, the comedy side of the Fringe Festival still gets sponsorship by Perrier at the Perrier Awards. (For those who don't know, Perrier is produced by Nestlé, a company notoriously implicated in exploiting third-world mothers by heavily promoting their baby-milk formula over breast-feeding.)

Finally, what of the many other festivals in the festival city, the authentic ones created by the people for the people, which aren't high-profile, sponsored events, how

do they fare? The Hindu Duschera, the Mela, the 'Burry Man', the Beltane Fire Festival, what support do they get from the City Council? Being an organiser of the annual Beltane Fire Festival on Calton Hill, I can tell you that although it's a community arts project and is attended by 15,000 people, both locals and tourists, it's been given no financial help whatsoever since 1998, when the Council withdrew its then meagre support. Instead, each year the festival is squeezed to near extinction by escalating costs caused by the increasingly stringent health and safety restrictions. Admittedly there is one Edinburgh city councillor who morally supports the festival and who has described it as "the most authentic and vivid artistic expression from Edinburgh people". But regardless of this, or of the fact that the fire festival has been featured in countless TV documentaries, including Channel 4, or international magazines - ranging from National Geographic On-line to German 'Marie Claire' - it seems to many that because the festival is organised as a free event and doesn't fit a safe, middle-class agenda, it's disfavoured by those who make the rules. Instead, the current climate in the Festival City seems to favour bland offerings such as the Festival Cavalcade or the aimless consumption of the Hogmanay revelries, both of which nonetheless offer bonanza opportunities for corporate involvement.