

RISKY BUSINESS AT THE EDINBURGH FRINGE FESTIVAL, 2008

VICTORIA GRAINGER



As a Birmingham based writer and a fervent supporter of new writing, I have annually made the pilgrimage up north to the artistic Mecca that is the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Each year I become more experienced in the ‘experience’ and am tirelessly intrigued by the unquenchable optimism of the colourful ‘show people’ and the assortment of shows on offer. There were 2,088 shows (to be specific), 31,320 performances, an estimated 18,792 performers, 247 venues, and 1.7 million tickets sold this year. The Edinburgh Fringe Festival claims a 75% market share of all attendance at Edinburgh’s year-round festivals, that is including the International Festival, the Film, Book and Jazz Festivals, and the magnificent Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Not bad for an event labeled ‘a third-rate-circus,’ the parting shot of the outgoing Director of the rival International Festival, Frank Dunlop, in 1991 . . .

The Fringe has gathered strength since it emerged alongside the International Festival in 1947, a post-war initiative to re-unite Europe through culture. The Edinburgh Fringe now offers practically every kind of creative entertainment 24/7, and in every nook of the striking, historic city.

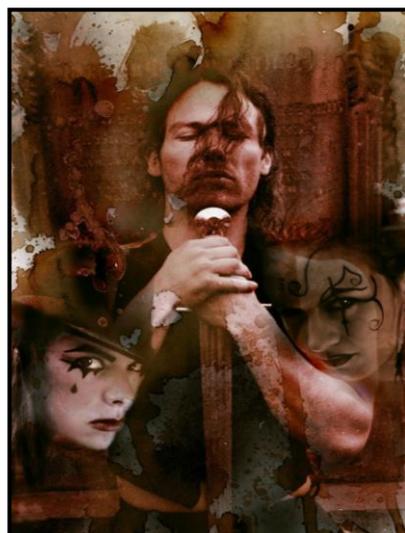
Each of the three weeks has a distinct feel. The gathering hum of hope and squeaks of panic create a good mania and frenetic energy typical of Week One. Week Two has a word-of-mouth buzz, and a still optimistic bent. Week Three is distinctly quieter, increasingly sombre as built up frictions, late, late nights, and too early mornings take their toll. By the onset of September, there is a slightly jaded feel as the possible unemployment for many looms like the glowing sun behind Arthur’s spectacular seat.

The range and diversity of work continues to grow. You encounter world premieres and mind-blowing experiences side by side with student and octogenarian brass ensembles. 2007’s *Fuerzabruta* was a phenomenal circus-style extravaganza in a tent by the Leith Docks, and in their words, “a non-stop collision of dynamic music, visceral emotion, and kinetic aerial imagery,” experienced in seeing performers frolicking in a watery world suspended inches above the audiences’ heads. This year’s Not Man Apart Physical Theatre Ensemble from the Monterey Peninsular won a Fringe First for *Pericles Redux*, a daring blend of theatre and dance in a breath-taking version of Shakespeare’s *Pericles*.

There are beautifully woven, up-close-and-personal tales told by and to ‘idiots’ from settings as diverse and outlandish as cargo containers to toilets. I’ve watched a noir-detective-thriller in the back of a lorry; you can sit in a cramped freight box hearing an ‘asylum seekers’ story; and I’ve even munched on custard creams with more



actors than audience in a poky caravan, in a verbatim theatre enactment of the Worcestershire floods. I have followed Racine's *Phaedra* round the ruins of Craigmillar Castle whilst wearing a Hessian sack, watched Douglas Maxwell's *James II* inside the Roslyn Chapel (now celebrated due to *The Da Vinci Code*), and wandered around Her Majesty's Customs House in the most fascinating thing I've ever seen, a stunning site-specific art/theatrical instillation, *Don't Look Back*, by Dream Think Speak Theatre Company. They also allowed you to follow a tantalising, evasive Eurydice around fifty live actors scattered throughout the building on an individual journey that truly made me feel like 'Alice down the rabbit hole'.



Then there are the less explicitly commercial, smaller companies and student theatre groups, willing to sustain loss and take a risk. Student drama assumes its most well-known and prestigious form in the Cambridge University Footlights, who having generated the likes of Jonathan Miller, Michael Frayn, Emma Thompson, Nicholas Hyntner and Simon McBurney. Along with their Oxford Review rivals, the Footlights are a regular comedy presence at the Fringe. Birmingham University's history with the Fringe is building. 3Bugs Fringe Theatre was founded in 2003 by Stephen Makin and Michael Wood, with the primary purpose of helping students take productions to Edinburgh each summer. 2008 saw excellent reviews for their interpretation of Birmingham University's own MPhil Playwright, the late great Sarah Kane's *Crave* on its ten-year anniversary. The ubiquitous *Three Weeks Magazine* awarded their staging of *Crave* a maximum of 5/5 stars. Favourable reviews and awards like *The Scotsman* newspaper's influential Fringe First have a huge bearing on a show's success. Five stars enable a show to sell-out and often secure strong touring prospects throughout the UK and worldwide.

In increasingly hard times though, there is an unavoidable reality that people may be progressively less willing to risk money on the smaller, lower starred productions. Looking forward, the effects of the credit crunch will undoubtedly seep into the sales of the Festival for 2009. Can we afford to discard the reviews and the security blanket of star-ratings when money is tight?



In the spirit of the Fringe, I suspect that people who attend year-on-year, and even first time Fringers, will not and cannot afford to ignore gut instincts, and even sacrifice the odd hour to a group of gut-busting 21-year olds pouring their hearts into an obscure Lorca. Not knowing whether you will be playing to 200, 20 or 2 is also a strangely exhilarating and curve-learning experience. On one occasion, being part of a pitiable audience totaling two, I witnessed actors carry on regardless, and doubted they could have given more if they had been playing on the main stage of the National Theatre. That is the wonderful blithe spirit of the Fringe. Without taking the gambles, sitting through the newcomers, and supporting University

productions, the economy of talent and risk-taking in the theatre as a whole is at jeopardy.

The Edinburgh Festival provides a spectacular arena to celebrate the growth of new talent, and merits the investment of taking a risk with time and money. To do so protects our future theatre from becoming a ‘sterile promontory,’ and from an ostensibly safe but, I think, deceptive ‘five stars only’ system.

THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY’S HISTORIES CYCLE DEBORAH KERR

The Royal Shakespeare Company’s recent Histories Cycle, which played in repertoire first in Stratford-upon-Avon’s Courtyard Theatre before moving to London’s Roundhouse, showcased eight of Shakespeare’s ten conventional ‘English’ History plays, covering a period of just over a century. Under Artistic Director Michael Boyd, the Cycle featured a unified ensemble cast, with the 34 cast members taking over 264 roles between them. This has truly been an epic piece of theatre.

Although all the plays can be – and most usually are – performed separately, viewing the entire Cycle really gives an insight into the history and development of the story lines. One can almost sympathise with the devilish Richard III, after watching his grief at the murders of his father and younger brother in *Henry VI part 3*, and his emotional scene in that same play where he castigates himself for his deformities. In order to fully understand the back-story and characterisation of *Henry V*, arguably the most famous and most staged of the Cycle, one really does need to see *Henry IV*. When the play is performed on its own this dimension is missing – Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 film version took the step of inserting ‘flashbacks’ with the relevant scenes from *Henry IV* to overcome this.

That is not to say that the recent Cycle could only be appreciated in its entirety; however, viewing all the plays does add more to the experience. For instance, in *Henry VI part 2*, York ‘draws’ a family tree demonstrating that he is the rightful king with stones laid out on the stage. This in itself was a particularly novel way of handling the scene; yet for those who had seen *part 1* it was imbued with extra meaning: when York was told he should be heir to the throne, he was given a stone at the same time.

Stones aside, the Histories Cycle employed minimal props or scenery – an ideal way of dressing a thrust stage in order to depict all the different locations required for eight different plays without teams of stagehands and tedious scene-changes. Yet instead of being confusing, or even boring, this empty space could become anything, and was the perfect backdrop onto which to project one’s imagination.

The stage was clad in rusty iron, with a round tower at the back. As a Classicist, this reminded me of the ancient Greek stage, which also featured a building on the stage. The Histories’ large wheeled bed, pushed out for deathbed scenes, resembled the Greek trolley or *ekkyklema*, used to display tableaux. Finally, the *machina* – or crane – used to suspend actors over the stage in ancient Greek theatre was also apparent.

Usually ‘dead space’ in most productions, the Histories team used the area above the stage to add a fourth dimension to the performance. From jousting ‘horses’ (saddled

wire frames pulled back to the Circle balcony before being launched at each other in *Richard II*), to living portraits flying in as actors perched in picture frames, to a suspended harpsichord, soldiers zipping down from the ceiling on ropes, or even the Dauphin's court twirling on trapezes, the aerial space was maximised for every available square inch. This *machina* aspect of the Cycle made the productions particularly delightful and exciting, adding to the energy of each performance.

Despite the first seven plays being performed in faux-mediaeval costume, *Richard III* was in modern dress. This did come as a surprise, but when viewed as the culmination of the Cycle and this century-long story of usurpation and warfare, it was clear that there was a deliberate development in the costumes, and a step forward for each new era.

Richard II's Elizabethan-style finery (deliberately anachronistic to show the links between Richard and Elizabeth) lasts only for his reign at the end of the House of Plantagenet. The sobriety of the usurping Henry IV and the House of Lancaster develops longer and simpler lines from traditional doublets, merging through the maturing Henry V to the war-torn kingdom of Henry VI, where warring armies wore leather trench coats. Finally, as the crown is taken yet again by another House, there is another leap forward in style, with the tailored suits of Richard III.

The simplicity of the stage and costumes, however, merely served to highlight the quality of the ensemble cast. It was this ensemble which really made the entire production and linked the plays together in such a way that separate plays with separate casts (as in the BBC TV Shakespeare Collection) could never do.

Certain actors would always reappear in similar types of roles, for instance, or were always paired up together. Some brief examples include the three sons of the Duke of York who were also the three courtiers waiting on the Dauphin in *Henry VI part 1*, and Richard II and his courtiers. The warrior Joan of Arc was played by the same actress – Katy Stephens – who was Margaret of Anjou, another armour-wearing woman. Clive Wood was both Henry Bolingbroke – later Henry IV – who seized the crown from Richard II, and the Duke of York who overthrew Henry VI. Having the same cast on hand also meant that much could be made of the ghosts of previous characters haunting the stage in the later productions. The latter plays even featured a 'Keeper,' escorting the newly dead into the tower. An original way not only to clear the stage of bodies, but also to emphasise the ghostly activities throughout the Cycle.

Such a short review as this could never do full justice to these eight plays. I shall leave you instead with the final vision I had of the Cycle: the end of *Henry VI part 3* where Jonathan Slinger's Richard, having begun his murderous schemes with the killing of Henry and leaving the stage awash with blood, holds Edward's heir, dances manically to drums, and chillingly whispers the first word of *Richard III*: 'Now.'