

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in – The Adelaide Review

Melbourne, Edinburgh and Shanghai

Over a ten month period last year I had the chance, including the Adelaide Festival in March, to attend four international festivals. I haven't had such an opportunity before and it will be about the time of Halley's Comet before I am likely to again - so, with our own 2004 event little more than twelve months away - maybe it is worth some impressions and comparisons.

Founded in 1947, the Edinburgh International Festival was undoubtedly the template for Adelaide when it was set up in 1960 and similarities still abound even if the Medieval Old Town precincts where many of the events take place are a world and more than half a millenium away from North Terrace and the Torrens. It is August and we are attending the last six days at Edinburgh, an eerily quiet time once the clamour of the Fringe has ended. The Fringe is, of course, enormous and, like some ungovernable mutant offspring, threatens to monster the Festival itself. The printed program for the Fringe looks like the city phone book - 20,000 performances, that 's 1500 a day, spread over 200 venues (make that 199 since the Gilded Balloon went up in smoke in the Cowgate fires last month.)

With an estimated 12,000 performers the Fringe is, by any reckoning, a Darwinian struggle. Top acts from British TV comedy and visiting exotics like Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon are assured a profit, but it is precarious for many of the rest. In the last couple of days of the Fringe the local press start reporting instances of performers playing to full houses and still running up debts in the tens of thousands of pounds because of the profligate hotel and expense account habits of their agents and promoters. It seems the difference between gross and net in a performer contract is the difference between happiness and an outer ring of hell.

Despite its huge depth and variety, the predominant impression I get of the Fringe is that it is an eisteddfod of lager-lad comedy. I start to understand why the Guardian critic Michael Billington might consider it artistically irrelevant. And despite fifty years of trading, many local people I speak to seem to think that the Fringe *is* the Festival. Certainly the Festival has a modest profile by comparison and undertakes only a

discreet amount of local publicity and merchandising. Perhaps this is because it is so well-secured by corporate sponsors and loyal patrons, and is so faithfully attended by a staunch and well-heeled, if somewhat elderly, local and visiting constituency.

The music program is always impressive at Edinburgh and 2002 is no exception. Wagner fans are treated to both *Parsifal* and *Siegfried* and this year it will be the First and Second Ring Cycles. High points for me include Luc Bondy's coolly spooky production of Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, with exquisite minimal design from Richard Peduzzi. Local reviewers moan about the "franglais" diction from Mireille Delunsch's *Governess* but surely that's missing the point. Also, the Canadian Opera's production of *Oedipus Rex*, directed by Francois Girard and designed by Michael Levine, boldly animates Stravinsky's score with a hundred strong cast and a visual style somewhere between schlock and sublime.

The chamber music program is especially rich, and some of it is quite affordable - thanks to a once-only deal from the Royal Bank, a whole series of performances in Usher Hall cost just five quid a time. Among the new talents in the Queens Hall series - which cost closer to twenty pounds - are the gifted violinist Elisabeth Batiashvili, cellist Alban Gerhardt and pianist Steven Osborne. In addition there are performances by such established virtuosi as Alfred Brendel and the Janacek String Quartet. Wonderfully memorable also is a program of Beethoven trios from Frank Peter Zimmerman, Heinrich Schiff and Christian Zacharias.

The theatre program is far less notable. A Dutch version of *Macbeth* is, by all accounts, a Scottish horror, and a French production, *La Cuisine*, based on texts from Peter Handke, staged by Theatre Tattoo in Toulouse fails to create much in the way of kitchen sync. *Variety*, a new work from Scottish playwright Douglas Maxwell devoted to the memory of the days of Music Hall, is also less than compelling.

The dance program, by contrast, suggests greater range and quality. We miss out on Jan Fabre's *Swan Lake*, which strongly divides opinion, but attend several in a series of classical Indian dance recitals - including a Kathak performance by the eminent Birju Maharaj, accompanied on sitar and sarod by master musicians. The effect, in the crusty, airless old Royal Lyceum Theatre, is culturally disconcerting, especially when, at interval, ushers appear with trays selling eskimo pies.

What with the Writers' Festival, perched among its muddy duckboards over at Princes Street Gardens, where Harold Pinter meditates on his brush with cancer and denounces Tony Blair as a war criminal, and the 56th Film Festival, directed by Australian import Shane Danielsen, under way in Lothian Road, it's all heavily subsidised cultural go in Edinburgh.

The Melbourne Festival in the latter part of October is, of course, much closer to home. Not just literally, but in the familiarity of its signatures. This is Robyn Archer's first festival in Victoria and I have been enticed by her media pitch in Adelaide a couple of months earlier. I am an admirer of Archer's approach to programming and after two Adelaide Festivals, and then pioneering the Ten Day wonder in Tasmania, I'd say she is now the best director in the country.

Not that Melbourne has been entirely smooth for her. I am there for the last weekend and it seems the natives are getting antsy about a program which doesn't have enough Big Names. It is worth noting that both the Melbourne and Sydney Festivals have always traded on familiar work - often from artists pioneered at the Adelaide and Perth Festivals. Melbourne, most often, has defined success as the tried and true. It is the Adelaide audience which expects to be challenged - and a bit unhinged - by new perspectives in a festival, and an honourable procession of our festival directors have done just that. So Archer's Melbourne Festival looks pretty much like an Adelaide sort of event to us - and while she has had less of a war chest than was available to her predecessor in 2001 she still found intriguing productions.

Like *Total Masala Slammer*, German director Michael Laub's Hebbel Theater amalgam of classical Indian dance, Bollywood soap opera and vignettes of performance art. It gets a total masala slam from the local reviewers who dislike the clunkiness of its structure and suspect it as exploitative. It is, however, a blithe work, full of good humour and quite exquisite traditional performance. For me, it is far more engaging than the musty museum format for the Indian dance at Edinburgh, and, far from bogus, Laub's approach and scope is inventive and fresh.

I also warm to him after attending a 1 pm meet- the-artist session in the famously Famous Spiegeltent, where he chats agreeably with Robyn

Archer about his current and future work. The informality and accessibility of such sessions in Australian festivals are a welcome contrast to Edinburgh where forum sessions cost at least five pounds, require advanced ticketing, are sparsely patronised - I counted fifteen at one I went to - and, not surprisingly, are perilously low in energy.

Other notable productions in Archer's Text-focused program are the Argentinean director, Federico Leon's poignantly absurdist intimate family drama *Mil Quinientos Metros Sobre el Nivel de Jack* (1500 Metres Above the Level of Jack) where a widow takes to her bath in mourning for her husband lost at sea, and Kate Champion's *Same, Same But Different*, an often unsettling exploration of the theme of long-term relationship, through music, mixed media, text and dance.

K, written and directed by David Pledger is the wordily-named not yet it's difficult company's exploration of Kafka's *The Trial* presented as a reality TV show. It veers wildly between banal parody and unnerving insight but performances by Luciano Martucci and Vivienne Walshe, in particular, have a paranoid intensity that lingers. The chance to see rarely performed work by the American playwright Wallace Shawn is also welcome. *The Designated Mourner*, a creepy account of the liquidation of a group of artists and intellectuals in some nameless regime of the recent past or future, is performed to a jury-sized audience in a tiny church just off Gertrude Street by yet another lower-case theatre group, this one called *inthecompanyofpleasure*. Brian Lipson is interestingly mannered, Gabrielle Quin is excellent and, as the slippery narrator, Merfyn Owen makes a good fist of a role clearly shaped for Shawn himself.

The China Shanghai International Arts Festival is relatively new - last November saw only its fourth staging. This time, Adelaide producer Barry Plews and his Reckless Moments company were commissioned to put together works for Celebrate Australia Week, a venture which was heavily supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and included a symposium featuring Australian artists working in new technologies held jointly by the Shanghai Theatre Academy and the Flinders University Drama Centre.

Emphasising physical theatre works, Plews presents, among others, *Legs on the Wall*, *skadada*, the Sydney Dance Company's *Salome* and street theatre from Adelaide based *KneeHIGH Puppets* and Melbourne's *Snuff*

Puppets. Among other cultural exchanges are an Australian documentary film festival and a literary conference.

So what might be gleaned from some of this comparative shopping ? Looking ahead to the 2004 Adelaide Festival, and still smarting from the 2002 experiment, we would hope, for a start, for some consolidation of the format of the festival. Director Stephen Page has already signalled something of the kind with a week of classics, a week of new work and a week of youth culture - and somewhere in there is going to be the now annual Womad fixture. Edinburgh is a strong reminder of the value of classical and modernist music programming to restore the credentials of a festival and, if one focuses particularly on chamber groups and soloists of high calibre, there must be opportunities still to attract first rate artists.

Melbourne's festival also shows us, through Robyn Archer's vision, that it is still possible to program experimental work that is intriguing and imaginative and not just contrary or perverse. After all, this is something she learned in her home town over the past thirty years or so. The Adelaide Festival dance and theatre programs have, over a long period, raised local and national audiences to high levels of expectation and now is definitely not the time to relinquish that.

As well, none of the cities that I visited match Adelaide as a convenient and pleasurable venue. The balmy weather in March, the green expanse and accessibility of the Writers' Week location, the technical excellence of our performance spaces - especially after the Miss Havisham theatres of Edinburgh - the affordable quality and diversity of our food, and even more importantly, the inclusive, relaxed ethos of the festival itself. These are very great virtues.

The privately promoted events in the emerging festival in Shanghai are designed for an affluent elite - who, for instance, forked out the equivalent of \$150 Australian for Graeme Murphy's Salome. And even though Melbourne is lively on the Southbank it fails to capture the city the way our festival does. I am surer than ever that we need to preserve the strengths that our festival has established over forty years. Of course, Adelaide's organisers have to be realistic about recouping costs, but now is not the time to be tinkering and scrimping in the wrong places. Peter Sellars didn't fail us by giving us stuff for nothing but by keeping it too much of a secret. The opening ceremonies, the lunchtime forums, the

Writers Week sessions, the Gallery exhibitions and outdoor orchestra concerts should continue to be open events because, by being free, they are bestowed with a vitality and generosity that is the essence of civic celebration.