

Edinburgh People's Festival 2007 – Chairman's Report

Introduction

This year's Edinburgh People's Festival was the sixth of the modern age. We have presented more festivals than the original team did [1951-1954].

Given the many pressing demands from other quarters which the small band of organisers/volunteers faced this year and the fact that the programme was largely brought together at the very last moment, all our events went off successfully.

In years to come we will probably look back on 2007 and remember most the warm endorsement we received from author Ian Rankin who was glowing in his praise

** 'The People's Festival makes for a refreshing change. It is local, varied and goes to places other festivals wouldn't dream of going. Edinburgh isn't just Princes Street and the Castle, and most 'Edinburghers' don't live in the very centre of the city, so I congratulate the People's Festival – and hey its an absolute bargain to boot!'*

The festival was local - we visited St Leonards, Saughton, Leith, Gorgie and Dalkeith. It was varied – a literary tour, cabaret night, public debate, comedy and piece of theatre. And it was indeed a bargain. All our events were within everyone's reach - free or just £2.

I think we again achieved something important, something to be proud of. And I would especially like to thank Johanna Dind, Karen Douglas, Tom Freeman, Colin Brown, Gregor Gall, Celia Grainger and Barry Fowler, without whom there simply would have been no People's Festival in 2007.

I also want to acknowledge the continuing generosity of the People's Festivals many supporters at each of the venues as well as the many artists, performers and staff who contributed towards our many achievements. And I would like to again thank Edinburgh's trade's union movement for its consistent generous support of everything we do. Long may it continue!

A Charitable Company

Perhaps the most important step we have taken this year has been establishing the People's Festival as both a Limited Company and a registered charity. I am grateful to Steve Dent at EVOC [Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council] for his crucial assistance in this regard.

On each event of 2007 Week

Each event worked well and certainly surpassed all our expectations. More than 250 people supported the 5 'performances' in the different localities.

The Rebus Walk

Twenty five people left St Leonards Police Station on the Sunday evening and were treated to an enjoyable and interesting tour courtesy of our expert 'Rebusite' Colin Brown. Our party included Australian visitors to the city as well as Unison members and prison staff who had seen our programme via information circulated via union newsletters and websites. A great evening rounded itself off superbly when the heavens opened and the rains poured just after we all entered 'The Maltings' and sat snugly by the fire for our post walk pint.

A Night Out in Saughton

We are indebted to comedian Raymond Mearns and The Lindsey Dolan Band who ensured that the 60 or 70 guys who came along thoroughly enjoyed themselves. For me this event embodies the soul of the People's Festival. We take art and entertainment to people and places everyone else ignores and we do it boldly and bravely.

The Debate

With this event the People's Festival demonstrates both the depth of support we have among artists and intellectuals and our ability to stimulate debate on a wide variety of issues. We have included a debate in our programme in most of the past 6 years and we are always bowled over by the generosity and the friendship which the People's Festival has received from across the arts in Scotland. Our platform this year with actress Elaine C Smith, the irrepressible Richard Demarco, former MSP Mark Ballard and activist Joe Middleton would have graced any event anywhere in the city in August.

I was delighted and pleasantly surprised that more than 50 people participated in the debate on the artistic, cultural, social and political merits of independence. We promised in our programme that everyone who wanted to speak would have their say and we delivered on that promise. For me the key issue which arose was what kind of independent Scotland we wanted to see and there were plenty of alternatives offered in the course of the evening.

Comedy Night

Another triumph in Gorgie. The feedback from the regulars in the club, the comics themselves and those who come back every year for more has been really uplifting and terrific. Paul Sneddon, aka Vladimir McTavish was so bowled over by it and so full of praise for the event when travelling back in the car with Gregor and I that he has pledged to help the People's Festival any time we need him. I am grateful to the BMC club and The Stand for their invaluable assistance. It just gets better and better.

A Night at the Theatre

The curtain came down in Dalkeith with a rehearsed reading with standing room only! The play written by our own Celia Grainger had its first performance at the People's Festival. I would love to see the People's Festival being in a position where we can put the play on in full costume and full production. Indeed in future years this surely must be our aim, not just a rehearsed reading but a full production of a piece of quality new theatre such as this.

General remarks

Our 2007 festival was creditable given the restrictions we faced. It may have lacked depth and a certain 'uniqueness' but it carried our stamp nonetheless- a festival 'for the people by the people'. It was disappointing that we had to abandon our plans for a ceilidh as our grand finale, but it just was not possible given the restrictions we faced.

We strive to improve the standard of our events always and our aim remains to present work that is only available at the People's Festival.

We need more people involved in the Committee and we are always on the look out for interested individuals.

And we need to start working on the programme much earlier in year.

Budget -We need a much bigger budget to enable us to put on full productions, to vary the events we present and of course to put the festival organisation on a more professional basis. I very much hope that establishing our organisation as a limited company and registered charity will assist that aim. And it is satisfying to know that when all the bills are paid we will have kept our head above water for another year.

Media -And we need to improve our publicity work and our media coverage. We had very little media coverage this year beyond a couple of articles and letters in the Evening News and a piece about the play in the Dalkeith Advertiser! And 5000 postcard /leaflets is insufficient to get our message out as wide as possible.

Aims for the Future

I'd like to run EPF events throughout the whole year, not just a week in August; a Halloween ceilidh has been suggested, an event to mark St Andrews Night, Christmas pantomime, Easter parade, May Day, all offer us possibilities. I'd like to see many more challenging events/

entertainment and always of better quality than before. I'd also like to see us expand to include Mid, East and West Lothian too.

Overall

We have a wonderful idea here and we now need to consider how we move it forward.

When I think of the first People's Festival we organised in 2002 and see how far we have come it makes me even more determined to reach for the stars.

I believe the People's Festival established as a charity and limited company can help us put things on a firmer basis and tap into the enormous potential which exists. The Edinburgh People's Festival has much to be proud of in our achievements these past 6 years but now we really do need to step up a gear to stand where Richard Demarco puts us 'on the cusp of greatness'.

Colin Fox

Chairman, Edinburgh People's Festival

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