

Choosing Shows & Feast Miscellany

Performances generally commence around mid-morning and continue until well after midnight on the Fringe when comedy tends to predominate. There are many ways to go about choosing a show, the choice being largely determined by personality and temperament. It can vary from the nerdish camp where everything is pre-planned to the last minute tribe who consider that fun and enjoyment can only come with extempore decisions ... and all points in between. We probably veer slightly towards the nerdish camp, so take our approach as you will. Spontaneous individuals should probably give the next section a miss.

Choosing Shows on the Fringe

The Fringe needs to be treated separately on account of its sheer size. The statistics for 2008 provide some insight into the sheer scale of the operation: To give some idea of the size of the Fringe the 2008 statistics include: 2088 shows giving a total of 31,320 performances in 247 venues. The large 200+ page programme weighs just less than 1lb. Of course, the 64 thousand dollar question is how is it possible to choose shows before the start of the festival, particularly as the descriptions of the shows tend to be terse, abstruse and, in a minority of cases, positively misleading? It is probably best to start with our outline objectives:

- Objective 1 - aim to see four shows a day although sometimes it is three, in which case there is a solid excuse for a lengthy lunch or evening meal with friends. Occasionally, we manage five shows when finding time to eat anything can be problematic. You may instinctively consider that all shows are two hours or more. This is not so; indeed, many shows on the Fringe are in the 60-90 minute area. Comedy shows are traditionally one hour. Therefore, taking in four shows per day is not necessarily as much of a marathon as it may first appear. Some punters manage much more than us - some comedy aficionados that we know get to see 7 or more in a day!;
- Objective 2 - try to space the shows out so that minimally there is time to get to the next venue, and ideally enough time to visit a watering hole;
- Objective 3 - leave some gaps to fit in other items, e.g. a visit to an art exhibition.

Other factors that come into play when we initially browse the programme in June include:

- **Look out for companies** whose productions we have enjoyed in previous years;
- **similarly for actors / artists**, although it is necessary to be wary that the sequel to last year's "must see" show may well be a damp squib;
- **celebrities (but with caveats)**. Some names are real pros and provide excellent value for money. Unfortunately, there are some who appear to treat it solely as an easy way to make money, and they seemingly roll up unprepared. This is more likely in the area of comedy. One particular famous name liberally sprinkled his extremely thin material with swearwords (about one every 10 seconds, or so it appeared, a rate which obviously reduces the need for even thin material). While on this particular hobby horse, the use of the odd swearword is fine and can in fact be quite an integral part of the act, but one or two per sentence is extremely boring, except if you are Jerry Sadowitz when it is of course perfectly acceptable! One of the best examples of constructive swearing that I can remember was done by Henry Normal in the days when he was a poet / comedian. He did not swear at all except for an observation on the excessive use of swearwords. He recounted passing a building site and hearing, if I remember it correctly (it was back in 1992) "The f**kin' f**ker 'as f**kin f**ked the f**kin' f**ker's f**ker", which even Jerry Sadowitz would struggle to surpass;
- **the reputation of the venue**. Some venues maintain a generally high standard, the Traverse is the obvious example in the area of drama while Aurora Nova has established a strong reputation for physical

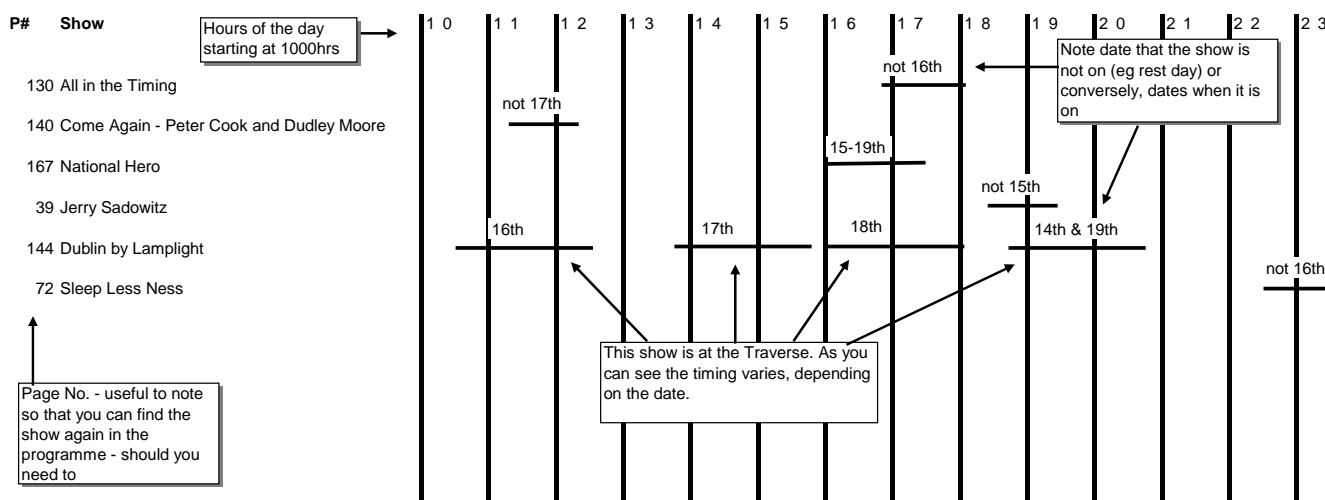
theatre and dance;

- **one-man shows (drama).** They can generally be relied on for the simple reason that the actor cannot afford to have an off-day. Unlike a multi-actor show, there is nowhere to hide;
- **mixing it up** - while our staple diet is drama, we include comedy, dance and poetry on the Fringe. This is coupled with performances on the International Festival, occasional sorties to the Book and Film Festivals, and visits to art exhibitions;
- **pot luck** - we still get seduced by the occasional title or marketing spiel.

Our initial choices are classed as either "definite" or "possible". "Definite" has a particular meaning for us at this stage of the proceedings; it is definitely going on the shortlist, which does not

mean that we will actually get to see it. "Possibles" will be assessed later, and they may also get to the shortlist although the majority do not.

Janet's day job is project management and she takes it upon herself to produce a draft plan. She constructs a grid with the hours of the day running from left to right across the page. Each shortlisted show is then entered on a separate line, along with the venue, any dates when the show is not on (some shows have a rest day once a week, and some shows are only on for a limited period), and finally a line is drawn under the hours of the day section to indicate the start time and duration of the show. This provides a single picture of the options and problems. I did say that we veered towards the camp of the nerds! An example is shown on the next page. You can find a skeleton for this grid plus the example on my web pages in the form of a Microsoft Excel [spreadsheet](#).



Example of Grid Showing Possible Shows with Dates and Times

The grid is used to create an initial draft schedule, an example of which you can also find in the same [spreadsheet](#) on my web pages. We use this draft to make an initial set of bookings. The basis for booking at this stage includes: shows for the first couple of days, as we prefer not to queue for tickets as soon as we arrive - this means that we tend to plump for the shows that we are most confident about; plus any other shows that we think will be popular and hence may be sold out by the time that we get to Edinburgh. We will typically end up booking perhaps 8-10 shows at this stage out of the 25-26 that we will eventually see. The remaining items on the draft schedule remain "possibles" for the moment.

The next stage in the process is to read articles about the forthcoming festival in the press in July. Some previews will start to appear 3-4 weeks before the official start of the Fringe, although the majority will emerge a week before the start. Most newspapers will provide recommendations across the various festivals, e.g. in line with the flavour of the month in the media at the moment for producing "the 50 best whatever's" we get the 50 best shows. In a reasonable newspaper the recommendations will largely come from the full-time critics, and if you regularly follow their reviews you will have some idea to what degree their tastes / views match your own. Newspapers to follow include: The Scotsman, The Herald (Glasgow), The Guardian, The Independent, and

The Times (London). See the [links](#) on my web pages for further information. Through this process we usually pick up on 3-4 shows that we either missed totally or that we were unsure about.

Be aware that there is a week 0 on the Fringe when some shows will be in preview, for 3-4 days before the official start date, typically at cheaper prices. The Fringe ends on the UK Late Summer Bank Holiday, which corresponds to the last Monday in August. Just to confuse you - this is not a Bank Holiday in Scotland, where the holiday is at the beginning of the month (is that all as clear as mud!). Working backwards, the official start date (as of 2009) is 3 weeks and 3 days before the UK Late Summer Bank Holiday, i.e. on a Friday.

Stage three of our planning process kicks in when the festival has commenced, and it consists of reading as many [reviews](#) as possible. The Scotsman has the most comprehensive coverage. Other sources of reviews include: the Guardian, The Stage, the Independent, The Times, the List and The Herald (Glasgow-based). On the web there are quite a few sites that provide a comprehensive set of reviews, including Festmag, Fringe Review, Threeweeks and EdinburghGuide.com. See the web site for a full list. Be careful that with any widespread coverage: the regular critics will be supplemented by an army of others who have been drafted in for the duration. They are people that you do not know. Age can be a particular issue. What appeals to a young reviewer (say a student in their late teens or early twenties) may not necessarily appeal to a middle-aged person. This is particularly true of comedy. I have always considered that it would be useful to have some background on reviewers to have some idea where they might be coming from - but that is another of my hobbyhorses that I shall not bore you with any further.

Our schedule is refined in the light of all this research with probably another 3-4 changes being made before we reach Edinburgh. The final, and by far the most important, piece of the "choosing a show" jigsaw is the "word on the street". Obviously, you are there in the thick of things by this point. A good B&B (or other communal place where you are resting your head) is arguably the most valuable source of information if there are other guests who are festival-goers. Being Festival time, it is highly likely that there will be other

kindred spirits, although we did stay in a B&B one year when none of the guests attended any of the Festivals - some of them did not even know that there was a festival going on!! Apart from that single instance, the other years have been filled with festival-goers who between them had covered the main types of show that were on offer.

The critiques are invariably open and honest, allowing a reasonable decision to be made on a show's suitability. The conversation can easily encourage you to experiment, trying new areas. The only proviso that I would put in here is comedy. One person's humour is different to another's and this makes it difficult to recommend a show without understanding what makes them laugh. Having singled out comedy, there has been the odd example in other areas. The worst recommendation that we ever made, albeit unwittingly, was to a lady who we had merrily chatted to for several years at Sibbet House who we thought that we knew sufficiently well to make the recommendation. It was for Tom Courtney's brilliant one-man performance in *Moscow Stations*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is a mixture of comedy and tragedy that portrays the sloth and corruption of Communism; it is a portrait of a soul, filled with wisdom and pickled in vodka, who spends his days traipsing around Moscow. What we did not know was that this lady worked in Social Services, and she had quite a lot of dealings with alcoholics. It followed that it was not her idea of a good time to sit and watch a play about one.

Chatting to people in the queue, as you wait to get into a performance, is another rewarding way of teasing out information on those unmissable shows. The problems at this stage are likely to be that: (a) the unmissable shows are already fully booked; or (b) you are struggling to fit them into your (by now) tight schedule. We usually change 3-4 shows after we get to Edinburgh, although there is always at least one show that we would dearly like to see but cannot fit into the schedule.

So, does all this mean that we avoid the turkeys, those really awful shows that you really wish that you had given a miss? No, but the possibility is much diminished (we have only suffered one in the last two years) and the general standard of our choice has gradually improved with each festival.

Choosing Shows for Other Festivals

The first programme to see the light of day is that of the International Festival in March. We will tend to pick out a drama show and possibly a dance performance at this early stage. Serious music lovers may well book the majority, if not all of their shows, at this time. One of the reasons for deciding early for the International Festival is that most items do not have regular daily performances; they may only be on one or more selected dates. Unless you live locally or are fortunate to be in Edinburgh for the entire festival, you may be further constrained by the dates that you will be there.

If you are a member of the Edinburgh Festival Muse Society, apart from receiving newsletters throughout the year, there will be a two week window to book shows before they go on sale to the general public.

On the music front Susan and Cal, fellow Sibbet House guests and friends, adopt the following approach. Susan is a great music lover and follows the scene avidly, reading reviews plus magazine and news articles, as well as attending concerts all the year round. She pays particular attention to the progress of new and upcoming artists. When the programme arrives she has a fairly clear idea of what she wants to see; her main problem is that there is so much that she would really like to see, if only she could stay for the whole festival!

Details of the programmes for the other festivals appear in June. If you want to see a popular author at the Book Festival then it is imperative that you book immediately, as she is almost certainly only giving one performance. It is not uncommon for at least one author to sell out on the first day that tickets go on sale, e.g. Muriel Sparks the author of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* in 2004. With the Film and Jazz Festivals, it is likely that you will have fairly clear thoughts on the likely performances that appeal

A brief mention of the Tattoo at this point although it is not part of the Festival scene *per se*. If you are interested in going to a performance it pays to book early. The 2005 Tattoo which ran from 5th-27th August was sold out by March 31st! People come to Edinburgh from far and wide just to see the Tattoo, many arriving in coaches.

Busking / Street Theatre

Tourists and locals who are not particularly interested in the festival are catered for by the wide variety of busking and Street Theatre that can be found dotted around the city centre. The most popular spots for these activities are: the pedestrian area adjacent to, and between, the Royal Academy and National Gallery buildings on the Mound; and on the High Street in the area between George IV Bridge and the junction of North / South Bridge. In addition, there is the popular Fringe Sunday event which is held in the Meadows on the second Sunday of the Fringe when groups perform pieces from their shows. From the spectator's perspective there is some free entertainment, while the groups get to advertise their wares.

Festival-goers can also stumble across other free entertainment, such as a magician performing a trick to advertise his show to people who are queuing for tickets at the Fringe box office. Most memorably, we remember queuing for an Eleanor Bron show at the Pleasance. There is a small grassed area on one side of the courtyard, fenced off by a low wall where a small caravan was parked. Within a few minutes of joining the queue we were being royally entertained by three actors (two male and one female) who put on a very amusing, abbreviated version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, both inside and outside the caravan, complete with Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture playing in the background and whizzing canon ball, alias a black-painted football, at the appropriate point.

Occasionally, there are just strange sights to be seen, e.g. two people in full rabbit costume, riding on a moped!?

Feast Etiquette

There are a number of things that would improve the festival experience. Some of the following observations apply generally to attending shows anywhere, while others are arguably specific to Edinburgh. At the risk of being accused of being an old fuddy duddy, here goes with some obvious examples.

Helping to keep the schedule on time. With multiple shows going on at a given performance space, particularly on the Fringe, there is invariably a rush to remove the scenery from the last show, put up the scenery for the next show, and then get the punters through the door and into their seats. There is frequently little time to spare and it does

not take much to fall behind the clock. Falling behind the clock is a cardinal sin: not only can it have a knock-on effect at the venue, making all subsequent shows late; but it can also make the punter late for his next show.

On the production side, companies can help by having more minimalist sets. On the punters' side, we should be ready when the house opens. In particular, it would help if we had our tickets ready. If you have multiple tickets that are still joined together, separate them to avoid the usher having to do it before she can tear off the counterfoils with the inevitable delay - the larger the venue, the greater the overall hold-up.

Seats are not usually numbered, except on the International Festival, and it is infinitely quicker if people go to the end of their chosen row (in most venues rows are relatively short and hence the choice of seat does not affect your view). Avoid leaving gaps, notwithstanding the human nature thing that you would prefer not to sit next to a stranger, and do not reserve seats for the friend that you just spotted further down the queue. Have a drink with him afterwards if you need to chat.

At the end of the show, leave reasonably smartly. One of the most annoying habits is for people who are chatting on the way out to suddenly stop in the aisle or exit as their conversation reaches some crucial point, completely oblivious to the mass of humanity behind them who are in urgent need of refreshments, the loo, or to just get to the next show. I say mass of humanity because it seems to be a much more notable phenomenon in the larger venues. This last observation definitely applies to any reasonable sized auditorium anywhere in the world.

Other Shows in Progress. In those venues where there are multiple performance spaces remember that other shows may be in progress on your way in / out. Therefore, adhere to the notices that you will see to keep the noise levels down.

Visits to the loo in mid-show can be disturbing. If you have to go then you have to go. It is often those that drink alcohol during a show that seem to struggle in this department.

Leaving mid-show. Try to avoid leaving in the middle of a show, no matter how bad you think it is. It must be extremely dispiriting for younger artists who are trying to find their way to see members of the audience leaving part way through a performance. I have even seen people leaving after as little as 5-10 minutes. I have no idea how it is possible to form an opinion so early. I have been to performances where the first half was poor but the second half immeasurably better. If it is bad, just put it down to experience - the rough and tumble of the festival.

Getting picked on. Beware of sitting in the front row at stand up comedy shows unless you wish to get picked on!

Always accept fliers. The helpless souls that spend their days handing out fliers need to be perked up. Many of them seem to gradually lose their enthusiasm as the day progresses and the number of refusals mounts, especially if the weather is damp. So, accept them, even if you have no intention of going to see the show; it costs you nothing. Some interesting banter can be had, as they do their best to sell you their show. Occasionally, it is the person doing the (one-man) show who is forced to go out and sell the show, as he cannot afford to pay somebody else to do it.