

A Punter's Tale from the Feast

Janet (my better half) and I have met up with my daughter, Emma, at the River Café in Hammersmith for my birthday meal; visits to good restaurants have long since replaced presents in our household. It is early February and the conversation eventually turns to holidays, and in particular to Emma's plans.

When she has finished outlining her shortlist of exotic places around the globe, she asks with a quizzical straight face that betrays a hint of irony "And where are you off to this year"? Our immediate response, shouted in joyous unison to the temporary discomfit of neighbouring tables of "Why, Edinburgh of course!" causes her look to change rapidly. It is that typical pained offspring to parent look of undisguised exasperation, as in "You are so boring". "But you go there every year - why don't you have a change?" she continues, the ironic look returning, clothed in something akin to optimism that she can finally persuade us of the error of our ways. We exclaim, again in harmony, that it is different every year, that it is enjoyable, that Edinburgh is ... too late, a look of resignation indicates that she has given up and mentally filed us back in the old fogey drawer where she always knew that we belonged. "Why don't you come with us this year to find out what it is really like?" we enquire, picking up the irony baton. A steadfast "you must be joking" glare signals that it is time to change the subject, or better still to check if "death by chocolate" is still on the dessert menu.

Apart from these occasional attempts to persuade us to change our habits, the first reminder of the festival usually occurs in late March / early April with the graceful arrival through the letterbox of the programme for the International Festival. It is a slim, invariably well-produced booklet that reflects the advance planning that is necessary for such an event. As we are, to our chagrin, barbarians with respect to music and opera, it does not take too long to shortlist possible dance and theatre performances. Quiet returns until mid-June when the Fringe programme, physically akin to a meaty travel catalogue, announces its brash arrival through the letterbox with a loud and unmistakable thud. It is traditional, though not particularly by design, that we take the Fringe programme to our local pub on our weekly visit to have an initial browse at this year's offerings. This activity always seems to generate much attention

among the staff and the locals, as they assume that it must indeed be a travel brochure, but somehow there is something that is not quite right, especially when they hear Janet asking for the umpteenth time, "Is this (show) a definite?" and me replying with an assenting grunt or shake of head. Mostly, nobody asks just what we are up to.

It usually takes a couple of weeks to produce an initial shortlist, aided by the arrival of the Traverse Theatre's own programme and the availability of the programmes for the Book and Film Festivals. The Traverse, Edinburgh's permanent theatre, is the bedrock of drama on the Fringe. Its programme is more forthcoming in the descriptions of the shows, in sharp contrast to those in the Fringe programme that tend to be extremely pithy. Janet, who is used to planning in her capacity as an IT Project Manager, always takes charge of the planning process. It would be grounds for divorce (one of many no doubt) if I even dreamt of invading her patch. The result is an initial set of bookings, covering any "must see" show or any performance that is classed as a strong probability and which may be quickly sold out.

Mid-July, and the journalists' diary heralds the imminence of the festival. Any actual or perceived controversy is stoked up, and no doubt occasionally invented. They tend to include: the blasphemous or outrageous show that must be banned; the stirring up of any bickering between various factions, particularly the International Festival and the Fringe; "the festival is not what it once was"; "is this the end of the festival as we know it - does it have any relevance today" ... and so on.

Despite my cynicism, I must admit that controversy has been a bit thin on the ground in recent years. Where are all those outraged city councillors when you most need them, the likes of Councillors Moira Knox and John Kidd, or churchmen such as Rev. Stewart Macpherson who demand that a particular artist or show should be run out of town? The only item that has percolated to the South East of the UK this year has been a muted call to bring the festival under one organisation. Argh!! (as they say in all the best comics). Some newspapers have recently compensated for the lack of fiery councillors by using authors, preferably those who live in

Edinburgh, to whine and complain endlessly about how unbearable life is when the barbarian hordes (that's us punters) descend on them. Well, if it helps to keep them from the bread line I suppose ...

Useful previews start to appear in late July, along with lists of recommended shows - "50 unmissable shows" seems to be *de rigueur* at the moment in such previews. Whatever the number, they provide useful lists to compare against our own shortlist, which is modified accordingly. Lists of the best places to eat and drink also appear, prompting me to wonder just how the majority of entries make such lists, as I tend not to have heard of many of them.

The appearance of the first reviews heightens the sense of anticipation. However, the unmistakable sign for me that Edinburgh beckons is the arrival of work. I am self-employed and I have decided that people who are aware of my jaunts to Edinburgh deliberately keep work from me until the week before we are due to be there - not that I am paranoid you understand. More than once I have been perched at my PC around 5am on the morning of departure, bashing out documents, leaving a whole 10 minutes or so to do my packing; it is a good job that we both travel light. As we only live about 30 minutes away from Heathrow by car, our journey is relatively painless. Flying time to Edinburgh is around one hour, time enough for our ritual "we're on holiday now" gin and tonic. I notice that that this is the second reference to alcohol already - oh dear. We take the bus from Edinburgh airport to the city centre, an excellent service that runs every 10-15 minutes for most of the day; the journey time is 20-30 minutes, depending on the traffic. Our almost child-like sense of anticipation is ratcheted up on the bus journey as we pass familiar landmarks: the PC World store in its dreadfully lurid mauve livery; the zoo at Corstorphine; Murrayfield, the home of Scottish Rugby Union; and Haymarket, the original railway terminus before permission was eventually given for the track to continue on to Waverley Station.

Eventually, Princes St. slowly comes into view. The shops are on the left-hand side, and in truth they are as uninspiring as the shops in many UK cities. All the action is on the right-hand side where the immediate view is of St. John's, somehow an untypical Scottish church to my untutored eye, with St. Cuthbert's, a church whose history goes back to at least the 9th century, nestling behind it.

They quickly give way to the pleasant aspect of Princes St. Gardens, with one's eyes quickly drawn up to the stirring and imposing view of the Castle, sitting on top of the stark, almost prehistoric-looking rock that was once a volcano. The historic look is tempered at this time of year by the presence of the large temporary stands that are erected on the Castle Esplanade for the Tattoo. In front of the bus, the foreground is dominated by the low architectural splendour of the Scottish Royal Academy and National Gallery buildings at the bottom of the Mound, with the tall, graceful Gothic Scott Monument beyond them, and the monuments on top of Calton Hill in the distance.

We alight from the bus near the Mound and attempt to make our way through the crowds of shoppers and tourists on Princes St., many of whom seem oblivious to the festival in their midst. We are fortunate in that we stay centrally in one of the Bed & Breakfast (B&B) places in the mainly Georgian New Town, and we are usually only faced with a 5-10 minute walk.

We struck gold in our first year when we picked Sibbet House from *The Which Guide to Bed & Breakfasts*, using that well-renowned and virtually infallible method of selection, "eeny meeny miny mo". It was run by Aurora and Jim Sibbet. When Janet rang originally to inquire whether there were any rooms available at the inn, we were fortunate to find that there was just one left. As repeated in the glossy literature that subsequently arrived, Jim promised over the phone to play the bagpipes at breakfast - but we went anyway. The house had a wonderful hanging staircase that elegantly snaked its way up to the top floor. It was beautifully decorated and furnished by Aurora. The highlight was a French style drawing room that looked like something straight out of one of those country mansions where visitors are allowed to look but not to touch. Well, the room was for use by the guests although we sat down very gingerly on the first occasion that we eventually managed to summon up the courage to cross the threshold.

My only personal disappointment was that we were staying in the Pink Room. The disappointment was with the colour, not the room. My mother was dubbed Mrs Pink: our wallpaper was always pink; the doors pink, the paintwork (apart from the ceiling - phew!) was pink. Enough of my childhood traumas, I was perfectly capable of managing in a pink room given that it was predominantly just a place to rest one's head at the end of a long day at the festival. Unfortunately,

Aurora and Jim retired several years ago and we are trying out a new B&B this year, Penny Airey in Dublin Street. We quickly unpack and within 10 minutes we are out of the door heading for the first

of two shows that we are able to fit in that day, one in the late afternoon and the other later on in the evening.

Breakfast at Sibbet House

Jim was "front of house" with Aurora acting as the chef. He was an assiduous host, deciding on the seating arrangements, and ensuring that he introduced the guests to each other. He used any foible or relevant point of interest to break the ice, along with the occasional subtle sales pitch: "these are the Cohens, Susan and Cal from Washington DC, festival aficionados who have been staying with us for the last 15 years". Service was punctuated with: keen observations such as American guests' use of cutlery - what are they doing with the other hand?; frequent demonstrations of his encyclopaedic knowledge of bus routes for those requiring directions; taking bookings for bagpipe recitals after breakfast; and recommendations on places to eat, usually to the north of Princes Street, as he proclaimed that the Old Town was "foreign parts". This was followed by the daily joke, two if you were lucky, delivered in a dry style, perhaps accompanied by an anecdote or apocryphal tale. A lesson in business; reviews of the shows that Aurora and he had seen the previous day; the role of organised religion in modern society (well in any society actually); plus totally unbiased views on the political scene (!) were among the many topics in his catholic repertoire. It was always important to ensure that requests for extra toast were made between topics, so as not to disrupt the flow. There were occasional references to the chef, protesting that, while he had been married to her for over 40 years, it was never going to last. Aurora's arrival on completion of her duties in the kitchen was always the signal for a more in-depth discussion of the festival.

There was no discrimination: people of all nationalities, religions, political hues - even "woolly liberals" as he called us (for several years we used to sport a "Friends of the Earth" bag for carrying our bits and pieces around during the day) - were welcomed and encouraged to participate in the performance. His virtuoso routine was typically completed in around 45 minutes, but those who were acquainted with Jim, as we came to be, knew that we had only to toss an appetizing snippet into the air on one of his little specialist subjects to get the performance extended to an hour, possibly more: Human Resources (a job in one of his previous existences); the effectiveness of Edinburgh City Council - discuss; shocking changes in local architecture; or his latest property acquisition were all staple items.

It was only the fact that the breakfast dishes were gradually disappearing around us, being quietly removed by a patient member of staff who had probably heard enough over the years to make a passable stand-in for Jim should the need arise, that we were eventually forced to face the day, and we departed to see some shows, have a few beers and a bite to eat, all to help kill the next 23 hours until it was time to experience this *coup de theatre* all over again.

At home, breakfast is a time of peace and quiet, helped by the fact that we rise at different times; I am a morning person, Janet is not. However, breakfast at the B&B is sociable, full of free-flowing conversation. The relatively civilised hour (typically 08:30) may help. Like us, many of our fellow guests are there for the festival. We have met a diverse range of very interesting people from different walks of life and from various parts of the world. We have found: lots of ironic Americans (obviously this phrase is not an oxymoron); individuals working in the political sphere; people in the media who talk lucidly and coherently!; several authors; public servants; people working in social services; academics; self-employed business

people; and finally, retired people who consider that their previous existences no longer merit any discussion. Apart from gradually learning what other guests do, breakfast is the time to compare notes (good and bad) on the concerts and shows that we have all seen the previous day, and to bring any newly arrived guests up to date. It is fairly common to find that individual guests major on different art forms: some on music, others on drama, and one couple last year who managed 6-7 shows of stand-up comedy per day (were they doing a Ph. D we wondered). We found these personal critiques to be mainly sound; this is probably because we recognised those people whose judgement we were likely to trust.

The timing of our first show of the day dictates how we spend the rest of the morning. Some shows and concerts commence at around 1030-1100. If we have an early show the time is taken up with reading reviews (The Scotsman, Guardian and Independent usually), booking for performances in the immediate days ahead, having coffee with friends that we have made in previous years, or visiting an Internet café to check emails and have a caffeine injection. It was in the Internet café that we met an Australian lady who wrote poetry and was kind enough to read us some of her work. Somewhat bizarrely, not least because the café was behind the large and extremely busy Assembly Rooms venue, she was totally oblivious of the existence of the Festival.

If our first show is not until 1200-1300 we will take the opportunity to sample one of the many non-festival activities. A particular favourite is a visit to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. If you are fit enough it is a delightful walk of around 30-40 minutes from the city centre. The route that we take through the New Town includes: Abercromby Place and Heriot Row, both flanked by the delightful Queen St Gardens; Moray Place, one of the jewels of the New Town; Dean Bridge (if there is time for a slight detour) with its dramatic view of the Water of Leith 100 feet below at the bottom of a ravine; and along Belford Road which also affords the odd glimpses of the river. The gallery is composed of two buildings: the main gallery which was originally a school for destitute children; and the Dean Gallery on the opposite side of Belford Road. It has a good collection and has played host to some excellent exhibitions over the years, the Giacometti exhibition in 1996 which was the highlight of our visit that year being our particular favourite. The exhibition this year is the enjoyable *Francis Bacon: Portraits and Heads* although Bacon is not to everybody's taste. The Scottish Royal Academy and National Gallery buildings, both on the Mound, have also staged some good exhibitions, Miro and Holbein coming to mind in the recent past, while one of the more popular exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery has been the Royal Collection of Allan Ramsay portraits.

We normally aim to see four shows per day, occasionally managing five. Our staple diet during the rest of the year consists of drama, the visual arts and occasional dance, the majority of the performances being in London. In Edinburgh we try to be slightly more adventurous, as otherwise it

would be somewhat dry. We try more physical theatre and contemporary dance; the Aurora Nova venue (alias St. Stephen's church) had developed a solid reputation in this area. We include comedy (stand-up, sketches and playlets) and poetry when it is on offer. Many people consider that four shows a day is hard going, probably because they assume that every show is 2-3 hours. In fact, stand-up comedy shows religiously last one hour, book festival events range from one to 1.5 hours, and much Fringe drama and dance is in the same range. It is performances on the International Festival that tend to be longer.

Queuing prior to performances provides another valuable means of getting feedback on shows - this is "the word on the street". Once again, you can meet some interesting people. We particularly remember being engaged in conversation by a very talkative lady who was a dead ringer for Christine Hamilton. It was around the time that Christine Hamilton and her husband, the disgraced ex-MP Neil Hamilton, were being falsely accused of being involved in a rape. This lady's husband could not get a word in - just like Neil Hamilton. Shame that it was not Christine Hamilton, we may have been able to give her an alibi.

Unusual shows stick in the memory, probably because we do not see too many outside Edinburgh apart from The National Theatre of Brent. *The Snow Show*, a one man show of a Russian clown, Slava Polunin, had as its *coup de theatre* a finale which consisted of a snow blizzard, alias bits of paper that were blown over the audience by wind machines. *Puppetry of The Penis* was succinctly and accurately described by one critic as genital origami: two men turning their private parts into different objects. It was amusing as much for the reaction of the audience. There was a distinct Hen Night atmosphere, approximately 65% of the audience being women. There was much shrieking and cries of "oh no" (as in that must be painful) from many of the young women, accompanied by much "seems alright to me" shrugging from the males. However, arguably my favourite unusual show is *Bright Colours Only*, written and performed by Pauline Goldsmith.

Bright Colours Only

This show was a comedy, consisting of several pieces around the subject of death. We filed into the auditorium (the entrance was adjacent to the stage area) chatting with two friends that we had bumped into in the queue. The conversation was curtailed when we realised that we were being greeted individually as attendees at a wake by a lady. She thanked each of us for coming, and asked us to find a seat and get a drink. The stage area was set out as a parlour in her house, and the people who were near the front of the queue were seated on the stage (note that it was not raised) while the rest of us were mainly in seats just adjacent to the stage.

As the audience was still coming in (it obviously took sometime for her to greet everybody), waiters came round among us, some with sandwiches and others with glasses of whisky. I decided to go for the whisky, assuming it to be cold tea, only to discover that it was indeed whisky. This surreal picture was heightened by one member of the audience who was sat on the settee on stage. He started laughing at the whole bizarre scene; he had a very loud laugh and found it very difficult to stop.

At the end of an excellent and amusing show we were asked to process behind a coffin (that was empty at this point!) out of the venue. The exit led out onto Rose Lane, a pedestrian area. We dutifully followed and the coffin was put into a hearse which signalled the end of the show, whereupon the audience applauded to the total bemusement of passers-by and the people who were sitting outside the next door pub having a quiet drink.

A list of some of our favourite shows can be found in [Appendix A](#).

Our most tiring experience was a one-woman show (drama) where we were the entire audience. We were somewhat surprised that the actress did not cancel the show but it then proved exhausting to concentrate absolutely 100 percent and to stifle any potential yawns, as we did not want to give her reason to feel any more demoralised than she probably already was. I guess that shows which are designed for very small audiences, e.g. in the back of a taxi or in a flat, may have similar effects on the audience.

It is inevitable that the occasional "turkey" will be encountered; the performance without any redeeming features that you sincerely wish you had not attended. At this year's festival our very first show fits that description; stand-up comedy (at least I think that is what it was) played to a younger audience from the one that actually turned up. It is best just to put it down to experience and pray earnestly that there will not be any others on the schedule.

We like to sample the occasional new approach to a given art form. At this year's festival we came across one piece of drama, *An Oak Tree* by Tim Crouch and a piece of physical theatre, *DoubleThink* with Rotozaza, where one-off performers who have no prior knowledge of the show were instructed what to do by various techniques, e.g. telling them out loud, via earphones, or by giving them a

written script. These temporary performers naturally act in different ways from each other, producing different results at each performance, and eliciting different responses from the audience.

When a show has finished the first question is how long will it take to get to the next venue? Occasionally, it can be a close shave when there is little contingency, especially if the first show finishes late, although we have only been caught out by overruns on a couple of occasions over the years. More usually there is time to stroll and take in the unique beauty and history of Edinburgh. Wandering from the western side of the Castle Rock, where the Traverse, Lyceum and Usher Hall venues are situated, takes you through the Grassmarket, a wide street that can readily be imagined as a market place and a site of public executions in the Middle Ages. Turning left at the top of the Grassmarket into West Bow leads uphill towards the centre of the Old Town. Peering up some 30 or 40 feet from West Bow to Upper Bow on the level above, it is difficult to comprehend that West Bow, the official entrance into the town that was used by monarchs, once zigzagged its way up the rock to Upper Bow, and on to the Lawnmarket.

Moscow Stations

Choosing one's all-time favourite performance at the festival is a somewhat absurd but entertaining pastime. *Moscow Stations* was an adaptation by Stephen Mulrine of an autobiographical novel by Venedikt Yerofeev entitled *Moscow-Petushi*, written in 1970. An intelligent man, Yerofeev was expelled from Moscow University for absenteeism and insubordination, after which he drifted from place to place, quickly becoming an alcoholic. The book is based around the author's planned journey from Moscow to Petushi, some 80 miles away. This alcoholic philosopher, now a member of the disaffected under-class, vividly portrays the faltering world of the USSR in the era of Brezhnev, covering major issues such as employment, love, economics, and religion, interspersed with recipes for cocktails using any at-hand ingredients such as perfume, sock deodoriser and brake fluid. It is, by turns, extremely humorous and deeply moving. The highly original novel was not officially published until the late 1980s, a couple of years before Yerofeev's death. It has since been translated into many other languages. Tom Courtney's performance in this one-man play at the Traverse in 1994 was utterly spellbinding, and it continues to maintain top place in our personal list of top shows. It subsequently transferred to London and then off-Broadway.

Busking and street theatre are readily encountered on journeys between venues. Friends, Terry and Dick, remember their first trip to Edinburgh. They had stopped to get their bearings when a woman came out of a nearby building and asked them if they were American, and if they would be witnesses at a wedding. They agreed, assuming that this was some form of street theatre, a view that was supported when they saw the groom dressed in a kilt. To their surprise they discovered

that it was a real wedding (of an American couple) and they were "best man" and "matron of honour".

There are many watering holes to choose from along the way although we try to avoid big brand names and theme pubs. Our particular favourites, the Traverse Bar and the Pleasance Courtyard, are both Fringe venues, which can make things easier, particularly if the next show happens to be there.

"Chinese Water Torture" in the Pleasance Courtyard

The size and popularity of the Pleasance Courtyard naturally attracts those who are tasked with going out and selling shows, typically by distributing fliers. They vary from quiet, unassuming youngsters who silently leave leaflets on the table to the more loquacious, outgoing types who have developed their patter. The latter just have to hope that they do not get picked on by Janet (there is usually one every festival). I do my best to give them a warning look, usually by raising my eyebrows markedly in a sort of startled "bad things are about to happen" way in a frantic attempt to indicate to them that they should ignore her welcoming smile and the look of interest in their wares, and that they should be wary of the Chinese Water torture that is about to follow - I speak with some experience here. Of course, their confidence is such that they look right through me, and they launch into their well-rehearsed, polished monologue, which usually revolves around the packed houses that the show has been performing to and the blanket 5 star ratings that it has been receiving. Janet gradually starts the interrogation with the "please describe the type of comedy and the average age of the audience" ... or "how does your adaptation of this play compare with Hytner's at the National" ... or the gentle putdown "ah yes, I did read a review of your show", ... to the real suffering which is induced by taking whatever they say or claim and asking "how is that then" or "why" and continuing this line of questioning until the poor souls have quite lost the will to live. I would reward anybody who manages to withstand the onslaught reasonably well with some liquid refreshment. Unfortunately, even the most brash, confident types eventually capitulate under the stress, and they beat a hasty retreat, earnestly seeking to restore their dented confidence by happening on easier prey at the nearest table.

For good beer aficionados pubs can vary in quality from year to year but anywhere that stocks a well-kept pint of Harviestoun's Bitter and Twisted or Schiehallion will get our business (if we are talking about Scottish beers) or Timothy Taylor Landlord (English). Watering holes provide another opportunity to exchange views with other festival-goers and to meet the odd eccentric. We

particularly remember Eric Clapton's mate (at least he said he was) who, although he seemed quite out of it, regaled us for quite some time with tales of himself and his mate, and offered us free tickets to his gig - "just mention my name to the bloke on the door".

However, despite the joys of these interludes, the

shows beckon. The Corn Exchange's *Dublin By Lamplight* at the Traverse is an enjoyable, beautifully crafted and well-acted play that is set in 1904 with the fictitious themes of the opening of Ireland's National Theatre and a plot to kill the visiting British king. It is set over the course of a single day (shades of Joyce's *Ulysses*) and contains allusions to the founding of the Abbey Theatre in the same year, while some of the characters hint at its founders, Yeats and Lady Gregory. Down Frederick St at Aurora Nova, Do Theatre's *Sleep...Less...Ness* is an enjoyable theatre-dance piece on the subject of sleep and the subconscious. The projection of images onto gauze makes an effective backdrop to the dancers, helping to create a dreamy atmosphere.

We prefer to have a leisurely meal, usually in the early evening - others prefer a late lunch or a late evening dinner - although it naturally depends on your schedule. We try to choose a restaurant that is not too far off the beaten track, ideally one that is situated between venues. There are a variety of good restaurants, some excellent, with a plethora of pasta and pizza outfits. Overall, the staff and management of watering holes and restaurants are generally very welcoming, helpful and sociable.

Our evening is occasionally rounded off with something light; comedy shows or revues tend to be the staple diet as the evening wears on. Stand-up comedy is arguably the most difficult to choose. We find that much of it tends to be generational, i.e. stuff (note - not gags or jokes, but stuff) that makes youngsters, say under the age of 25, fall about laughing invariably leaves us slightly older citizens cold. We prefer dry humour. Will Durst, the American comedian, is one of our favourites. He is a Democrat (I think) who is delighted that George Bush is in the White House, as he does not need to write any gags, but merely relate what Bush has said (or purported to have said), e.g. "The trouble with the French is that they do not have a word for entrepreneur". Rich Hall in his alter ego as Otis Lee Crenshaw is another old favourite, while Bill Bailey and Rory Bremner are invariably bankers.

We have not come across any outstanding stand-up comedians this year. However, we have seen a couple of enjoyable comedy shows: *All in the Timing* (Peepolykus) which included an excellent

sketch about monkeys employed to write classics - shades of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in French. The latter had a delicious spot in the show where one of the players hit another across the face slightly harder than he meant to, resulting in both of them getting a fit of the giggles. Having lost track of where they were in the sketch they came to the front of the stage where an electronic display board was pumping out English subtitles for the benefit of those of us in the audience whose 'O' level French was struggling to keep up. Reading what was currently displayed, they stood staring at each other with slightly bewildered "do you have any idea where we are" looks, which brought the house down.

The days pass quickly in the Edinburgh bubble. I say bubble because you are mostly unaware of what is going on in the real world; the news is largely ignored and locals going to and from work seem to be in another time warp. Before we realise it our week is almost up. Our final show this year is *The Exonerated*, an example of what is called Verbatim Theatre, an in-vogue form of drama at the moment, which uses narrative that has been said or written by real people. This particular play covered the stories of six people who were put on Death Row but eventually freed. The company consisted of actors, apart from one lady who was playing herself, a fact that caught many in the audience by surprise when it was revealed during the curtain call.

There has not been much controversy this year. Normally, one or more factions weigh in with their views on the current state of the festival. Topics can range from talk of the imminent demise of a particular festival due to its lack of relevance, to its claimed dumbing-down, or its elitist high-brow nature. The internal wrangling, while it is sometimes entertaining, is largely irrelevant to us. In our experience, we punters talk about and recognise the Edinburgh Feast as a single entity that we can freely dip into and partake of. The occasional spin on the need to unite the various festivals under one banner fills us with dread. Imagine all those different factions and egos fighting for supremacy?! The Feast may be somewhat anarchic but that is its glorious strength.

"Martin's Cheese Show"

A visit to Martins restaurant became one of the highlights of our festival visits. It was situated in an unprepossessing street off Rose Lane (Rose Lane North) that you were only likely to find by accident if you did not know that it was there. I am not aware that it was widely advertised, relying mainly on recommendations by word of mouth. The Good Food Guide, as guides are prone to do I am afraid, provided a somewhat dry description of the place which in no way did it justice. It attracted more than its fair share of celebrities; I read that Kofi Annan, replete with bodyguards, dropped in during the G8 summit. It was a relatively small and intimate place which was owned and run by Martin and Gay Irons, an extremely pleasant and unassuming couple. The emphasis was on the use of high quality ingredients; a scallop dish that we had there was among the top two or three scallop dishes that we have had anywhere. Overall, the food was of a high standard and the wine list perfectly satisfactory. Service was excellent, being attentive without being intrusive, as it is in too many restaurants today where the emphasis seems to be on getting you in and out of the door as quickly as possible.

The *pièce de résistance* was what we fondly remember as "Martin's Cheese Show" - they specialised in unpasteurized Scottish and Irish cheeses. On earlier visits we had always been limited for time, rushing between shows, and consequently we never had time for a dessert. However, we eventually managed to organise ourselves so that we could spend a more leisurely couple of hours over the meal. The restaurant was fairly full on the evening in question, but we were first to get to the dessert stage having been the earliest couple to arrive. Being a cheese lover my choice was a foregone conclusion. Martin carefully threaded his way between the tables with the cheese trolley and the show, for that is what it was, commenced.

It took over 10 minutes, as he put on a captivating and frequently amusing performance on a subject that was very obviously a passion. He started with the Irish cheeses, introducing us to the likes of: Cooleeneye - made by Breda Maher in County Tipperary - he even produced a picture of Bridget the cow, one of the Kerry herd (although we did notice that Bridget seemed to change over the years!); and Ardrachan - made by Mary Burns in County Cork. Moving to Scotland, he introduced Lanark Blue, regaling us with the story of how the maker, Humphrey Errington, was unsuccessfully pursued by the "cheese police" - a tale of failed attempts to outlaw so called dangerous, i.e. unpasteurized, cheeses. Errington's Revenge, Martin's name for an evil-looking, life-threatening cheese, eventually brought the show to a conclusion.

I had noticed that, as the performance proceeded, other diners gradually started to listen in, until by the end the whole room seemed to be in rapt attention, all equally enthralled by the performance, so much so that every table appeared to have at least one person that plumped for the cheese, and of course they were each treated to a performance of Martin's show. We sampled the show on subsequent visits and never tired of it. And yes - the cheeses were excellent. If you are a cheese lover then a visit to one of Mellis's excellent cheese emporia is essential, as some of the above-mentioned cheeses can be found there.

Surprisingly, departure is never too much of a heart-wrenching moment, probably because we are "all cultured out" by the end of our week, usually having managed around 25 shows plus visits to two or three art exhibitions. I admire the stamina (and the pockets) of people who manage to take in more shows. I particularly admire those critics who are there for the duration. We agree that the best performance this year has been *Blackbird* by David Harrower on the International Festival. An excellent play, coupled with outstanding acting, made for a thought-provoking evening on the difficult and unpleasant subject of a sexual relationship between a 40 year-old man and a 12 year-old girl. After a period in jail he has carved out a new life, and the action takes place 15 years later when she seeks him out.

As ever, we are amazed at the number of talented performers that we come across in Edinburgh, many of whom will probably struggle to make a successful career out of their chosen art form. It is extremely depressing to see the number of largely talent-less individuals that manage to become successful these days due to the whims of media companies and the media in general. As for reality TV shows ...

At the B&B, Penny Airey has been an excellent and diligent hostess and we book for next year before departing. We seem not to have the strength to have one last look at the views, as the bus makes its slow progress along Princes St, except to note that the castle is shrouded in early morning mist. No,

we are off home to recuperate, catch up on the gardening, the sort of activity that allows the mind to relax, before getting back to the London Arts scene around mid-September.

Edinburgh is eventually consigned to the fond memories area of what passes for my old grey matter until my daughter's next attempt to get us

to see the error of our ways - I have already made a mental note to search out "50 Ways To Improve Your Irony" for her next Christmas present - and the arrival of the International Festival programme in March that will remind us of the pleasures to come once again next August at the Feast.