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LONGFORM

CULTURAL INTERACTIONS AT THE EDINBURGH FESTIVALS, C1947–1971

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For 70 years now, the Edinburgh International Festival and Edinburgh Festival Fringe have together formed an important site of cultural exchange, challenge, and controversy. When they began in 1947, “culture” was perceived as hierarchical, with “high” culture as the pinnacle of cultural production. The International Festival was seen to represent this high “culchah,” with the Fringe in the role of the “young challenger.”¹ The Festival and Fringe

developed alongside each other during the first 25 years, sometimes in tension and at other times in ways that were complementary, but in ways that influenced and helped to shape and reshape the other. By their twenty-fifth anniversaries in 1971, the two festivals were evidently distinct with each bringing, and continue to bring something interesting and unique to Edinburgh.

The inaugural Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama (EIFMD), as it was then called, took place in the late summer of 1947. The Souvenir Programme expressed its commitment to presenting the “highest and purest ideals of art in its many and varied forms” (EIFMD 1947); but, this was not all the Festival was committed to. Tourism served as a driving force in the festival’s early planning stages. The British Travel Association, the travel agency Thomas Cook, and the newly created Scottish Tourist Board were all involved. Indeed, in the lead-up to the first Festival, a writer for a local newspaper remarked of Edinburgh: “With no cultural aces of her own to strengthen her hand, she has scooped the pool—become a No. 1 centre in a paying commercial line, the commerce of culture” (*Evening Dispatch* 1947). There was a vital economic aspect to the venture; culture was viewed as a potentially important means of attracting tourists and boosting Britain’s economy.

Organizers felt that an international festival like that put on in Edinburgh was sure to attract tourists and, in doing so, make an important contribution to developing Britain as an international tourist destination.

Furthermore, the arts were positioned as an important ingredient in the new post-war world as part of the broader welfare state that sought to provide a better quality of life for the population. In the optimistic flush of the immediate post-Second World War period, the British Government had begun to take significant financial responsibility for the arts for the first time in history. The Arts Council of Great Britain, a body subsidized by the British Government to provide state support for the arts (albeit at “arm’s length”), was established in 1946 and soon became an important source of funding for the Edinburgh International Festival.

The Festival also reflected another important development in post-war Britain—the new alliance between the church and the arts. It has been argued (Calder 2000) that the war had helped to undermine the role of religion and traditional Christian morality in people’s lives. Each year the Festival began with a sermon in St. Giles, the “mother kirk” of Scottish Presbyterianism. The sermons preached each year were different, but the message was essentially the same: that art was a means of healing the wounds of war and that the Edinburgh Festival represented a chance for international visitors to “forget for a while the things that divide them, and to breathe together a tranquil atmosphere of spiritual unity” (Submission 1952). This last statement was made in a submission on behalf of the Edinburgh Festival Society for the Nobel Peace Prize in January 1952, made on the basis that it was “a constructive effort on behalf of European civilisation” (Submission 1952). The Festival demonstrated that it was a venture with at its heart Matthew Arnold’s conception of the role of culture as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold 1996 [1869]). In fact, the second Lord Provost to act as Chairman of the Festival, Sir Andrew Murray, articulated a concept of the arts in which he promoted the Festival to the position of “interpreter” of the arts. However, it soon became apparent that a policy of presenting the music and art of the “grand masters” meant that there would be little room for those who wished to create new culture, rather than interpret existing culture. There was a fundamental conflict between the two views of culture, particularly in terms of who defined what

constituted the “highest” standard of art. These conflicts were played out in Edinburgh during its annual festivals, and this is what makes them so interesting for the history of culture and its uses in post-war Britain.

At that very first Festival in 1947, eight theatre groups had turned up unexpectedly, organized performance spaces for themselves, and put on their own shows outside the program of the “official” Festival. The Fringe, as it was later to become known, represented what the Festival did not: it was mainly dramatic while the Festival initially focused on music. The Fringe was more likely to be contemporary than classical and shows generally affordable, unlike the comparatively expensive Festival performances. The main attraction in that first year was the Glasgow Unity Theatre Group, who very publicly disagreed with the expensive Festival prices and the lack of Scottish material in the program and, in challenging the Festival organizers in this way, can lay claim to inspiring the creation of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Bartie 2013; Hutchinson 1977).

The Edinburgh Labour Festival Committee, formed in 1951, reiterated previous calls to open the Festival to wider audiences with its call “to initiate action designed to bring the Edinburgh Festival closer to the people, to serve the cause of international understanding and goodwill” (Edinburgh Labour Festival Committee 1951). Comprising representatives from left-wing organizations as well as cultural groups and community organizations, the Committee served the purpose to present a “People’s Festival” based on the principles of co-operation and inclusion. These calls for change appeared at a time when the Festival had begun to attract criticism for being “stuffy”; one newspaper critic suggesting an alternative festival program with dance bands instead of orchestras, and clowns, acrobats, jugglers, and strongmen instead of cellists (*Scottish Daily Express* 1950). Audiences would have clearly recognized these juxtapositions as exemplars of high and lowbrow (popular) cultural pursuits, the difference between which had been part of public debate on culture since during the Second World War. The emphasis in the post-war cultural debate, however, focused on standards. And it was because artistic standards could not be guaranteed in the Fringe that it was decided in 1952 that the official Festival would not incorporate it into its program. Consequently, efforts were made to develop a separate, alternative festival. By 1958, the Festival Fringe Society was established and was underpinned by a commitment to welcome anyone who wished to come and perform in Edinburgh during festival-time (which is still the case today).² This was to mark a new and, as the 1960s progressed, increasingly co-operative stage in the relationship between the two festivals.

During the 1960s, Edinburgh developed a reputation for being at the forefront of experimentation in the arts, particularly in the dramatic arts. This was partly influenced by: the wider cultural upheavals of the 1960s, including the folk song, CND, and Beat movements that had stirred from the mid-1950s; the fusion of creativity and protest; and the almost hedonistic attitude of youth that had come from growing up during the stifling atmosphere of the Cold War. During the 1960s, Robert Hewison (1986) argues that ‘the arts were a battleground for the conflicting forces of social change’—and Edinburgh became a focal point in this. In 1959, Jim Haynes, a young American who had arrived in Edinburgh in autumn 1956 as part of his national service, had opened Britain’s first paperback-only bookshop in Edinburgh. The Paperback Bookshop was not just a bookshop, it was also a salon, coffee house, a gallery, a theatre, and a meeting place—including for the recently created Festival Fringe Society. Through the Paperback, Haynes became friends with the London publisher John Calder, who had quickly established a reputation as the leading British publisher of European and American avant-garde literature. Together, they introduced an International Writer’s Conference to the official Festival Programme in 1962 and an International Drama

Conference in 1963, events that brought artists together to discuss the issues important in their fields—and which brought controversy to the festivals (Bartie 2013; Bartie and Bell 2012; Bartie 2009).

Significantly, one of the first theatrical happenings to take place in Britain was staged at the Drama Conference. The theory of the “happening” had been developed during the 1950s in the United States, and the happening in Edinburgh in 1963 aroused interest in the form, which led to happenings being organized in London.³ This publicized new practices in the arts and represented a challenge to boundaries between art and life, as well as between different art forms themselves. Scottish journalist Magnus Magnusson wrote of the post-Happening debate:

Old friendships strained and snapped as people heatedly defended cherished concepts of art or defended the propriety of having them challenged. And isn't this one essential function of a conference like this, of a Festival like this? (The Scotsman 1963)

The Festivals were not the only spaces to challenge existing concepts of art and culture in Edinburgh. In January 1963, the Traverse Theatre Club opened its doors. The Paperback had provided a “vital cultural centre,” but it was the Traverse that became the “landmark for cultural advance” (Green 1999). It was certainly a first in Scotland and, it could be argued, in Britain (London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts was perhaps the closest comparison). A key ingredient in the success of the Traverse was its commitment to new material and Haynes, its Chairman and public face, was immediately deluged by a whole host of playwrights and artists keen to work with a theatre that actively encouraged new and experimental work. Its runaway success and growing reputation for bold innovation led to the Traverse being invited to present a play for the “official” Festival in 1965, despite being widely referred to as a “Fringe theatre.” In the midst of the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between typical “Festival” and “Fringe” performances, as the barriers between them became more fluid and more individuals and groups could be found performing both as part of the Festival and the Fringe at the same time. A noticeable shift toward the creators of culture took place, and that was soon reflected in national policy. In February 1965, the British Government published a White Paper called, *A Policy for the Arts: The First Steps*, in which it showed concern for a “rising generation that will want ‘gaiety and colour, informality and experimentation.’” It also expressed a commitment to supporting artists, “particularly in the years before they have become established” (Lee 1965).

It had been a key aim of the Traverse to bring people together and also to bring different art forms together under one roof. The Traverse was not just a theatre; it housed an art gallery and hosted folk song concerts, talk-ins, poetry readings, and even an international poetry conference in 1964. Indeed, an important concept developed by the Traverse was that of an “artistic open house” where the boundaries between different art forms and between art and life could be broken down. In many ways, what was happening at the Traverse in 1963 was echoed by the counter-culture years later; just as the Traverse aimed to be a total cultural experience, so the counter-culture expressed itself as “a living experience, a total way of life” (Nelson 1989). The culmination of this ethos was The Arts Lab, set up by Haynes in London in 1967 as an experiment in “art-and-life-style” that hosted multi-media events, films, drama, and all manner of artistic experiments. In the space of the year that it was open, the Arts Lab had “an enormous impact, capturing the spirit of the counter-culture, presenting the first of a new generation of writers, actors and directors who were rejecting the structures of conventional theatre institutions” (Itzin 1980).

By the end of the 1970s, there were over 140 arts centers in England, Scotland, and Wales, all modeled on Jim Haynes' Arts Lab, which had its roots in the Paperback, the Traverse, and the energy created around the annual festivals in Edinburgh. Itzin (1980) observes:

Edinburgh in the sixties, and on into the seventies, was an important area of fertilisation for alternative theatre—in the annual Edinburgh Festival with its showcasing and coming together of British and international fringe theatre, and in particular with the Traverse Theatre.

The Edinburgh Festivals together form an effective lens through which we can observe and examine a hierarchical model of culture being challenged and contested, often but not exclusively by a younger avant-garde who questioned and undermined the divisions between “high” and “low” culture. In this way, the festivals formed—and continue to form—a crucial site of creative exchange. Quinn (2005:930) remarked of worldwide festivals during the 1960s and 1970s:

Festivals during these decades grappled with definitions of culture, challenging accepted definitions of “high” and “low” arts and gradually breaking down distinctions between the two. Festivals like those at Avignon and the Fringe at Edinburgh now operationalised this radical rethinking in their programming, their use of venues and in the ways in which they tried to engage audiences.

Indeed, it was out of the Festival that the artist-driven Fringe festival came into being and gave the world the term “fringe theatre”. More recently, a growing number of Fringe festivals around the world exist independently of any “official” festival.

As Raymond Williams (1961) argued back in 1961, culture is a process and not a conclusion. The debates over the roles, definitions, and challenges of culture are still being played out in Edinburgh, in Scotland and, indeed, across the world. In Edinburgh, the People's Festival was briefly resurrected in 2003 to challenge the perceived elitism and expense of the Fringe, while the Edinburgh International Festival makes a concerted effort to be as accessible, affordable, and relevant to as many people as possible. It seems that arts festivals—and there are a rapidly growing number of them around the world—remain crucial arenas for cultural challenge, creative exchange, and for exploring, reflecting on, and responding to wider social and political changes in society.

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Notes:

1. "Culchah", writes Raymond Williams, was a mime word that came out of the association between culture and class distinction in the reaction to Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy (Williams 1988:92).

2. It is important to note here that an Artistic Director was in charge of the Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama programme, with the assistance and advice of a program committee, and only artists and performers invited could be part of the official Festival Programme.

3. A happening is a theatrical event, usually improvised or spontaneous, designed to surprise the audience/onlookers and blur the boundaries between theatre and reality.

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