

'To injure no man,
but to bless all mankind'

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Edinburgh's gigantic festival boggles with choices

When attending the wacky Fringe, you may get pulled into the action yourself

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Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

A EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND is an audience member at the Edinburgh International Festival, it can sometimes seem like you take your life in your hands. At this gigantic late-summer jamboree of culture and cultures, anything can happen.

Of course you could opt for a relatively quiescent time, concentrating on superb morning concerts at the Queens Hall (Schumann lieder, for example), or larger evenings at the Usher Hall (the Cleveland Orchestra plus choruses doing Berlioz's "Damnation of Faust," perhaps).

Or you could live more dangerously (and much less expensively) by wandering up High Street near the castle to witness heaven-knows-what peculiar degrees of street theater, comic escapades, or circus acts.

Numerically speaking, the choices are staggering. In fact, the Fringe festival, which once (53 years ago) was the spinoff of the main event, is the proverbial cuckoo that vastly outgrew the nest. Not that the main festival is ousted. Far from it. Its high quality is as good as ever.

But comparison between it and the anything-goes Fringe is all a matter of scale. The Fringe boasts 17,000 performances by 1,350 "companies" from Aug. 6 to Aug. 28. The main festival runs Aug. 13 to Sept. 2 and offers a mere 177 performances over its three weeks.

On the edges of these pro-

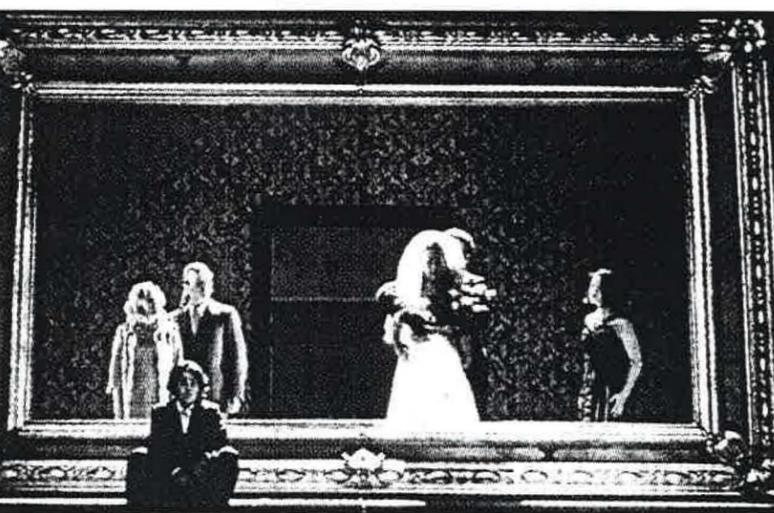
grams there is a book festival and a film festival (the touching British comedy "Billy Elliot" captivated me this year). And there is a jazz festival, which precedes all the festivals at the beginning of August.

Into this enormous lake you flick your rod and wait to see what you catch. If you remember a festival production 10 years after you saw it, it's memorable. If you forget it by the next night, it's forgettable. In the rush and energy of the present event it can be hard to be sure what will stick.

Will the stupendous energy of the New York City Ballet — in a program devoted predominantly to the choreography of George Balanchine, in a visit to the festival after decades of absence — stay fresher in the memory than the modest but highly original efforts of a small Fringe group of musicians and dancers calling themselves "Elixir — Pumps and Posh Music"?

This immaculately contrived intermingling of dance and classical music was performed in a tiny, dark venue to a half-full house. Yet it explored with imagination and skill an idea I have never seen explored before.

Cellists and violinists and clarinets are listened to, not watched, right? Wrong. At a live concert, we watch their movements while we listen. These movements contribute more to our listening, perhaps, than we



BARBARA AUMBULLER

FITLY FRAMED: The Stuttgart State Opera presents 'Alcina,' by George Frideric Handel, one of 177 arts performances at the Edinburgh International Festival.

admit. But when providing music for dance, the musicians are in the pit, and the dancers are all that is to be seen.

In "Elixir," the dancers move in the same space as the musicians, and the musicians take up unusually dance-like positions. The dancers at times even insinuate themselves into the small spaces between the musicians and their instruments. All very intimate and intriguing. And memorable.

Memorable, too, was the main festival performance of "Cabin Pressure," by the American company SITI. Although this performance by five actors at moments had the air of a seminar, it was highly dramatic and engaging. The subject was us — the audience. It seems that we are too restricted and restrained in our connections with the events on stage. All we can do is lean forward or back. The actors suggest rolling on the

mance of the Victorian classic, "The Diary of a Nobody."

I imagined the management wouldn't let me in. But they seemed almost eager to do so. "Sit over on the left," the girl whispered, and opened the door.

I was on stage!

Mr. Bewes paused in his monologue. "Come in, come in. No problem at all. It doesn't put me off in the least. No. I can still remember what comes next. Er, yes ... now let me see ..." (Then very pointedly as I found a seat in the dark) "So ... just to recap the whole story so far...."

I coped as well as I could.

Bewes makes a wonderful Pooter (the accident-prone nonhero of the humorous fictional "Diary"). Later, selling signed programs, the actor said he hoped I didn't think he had been rude. I assured him I loved it.

"I like to make a little joke out of latecomers," he explained.

The audience had clearly loved it, too — at my expense. But then, an audience is, after all, just a mass of Nobodies.

It's the people on stage that count.