

EDINBURGH FESTIVAL • Hayden Murphy

Cerebral entertainment with Fringe 'luvvies'

SEEING the final two programmes from New York City Ballet (Playhouse) on the same day was a mistake. Too much saccharine diluted by a gale-swept city. When the gals and cowboys in *Western Symphony* closed the afternoon performance, even a one-person Fringe show dissecting the penis (there is one!) seemed attractive. Duty called. Answered. And rewarded. Mid-way through the evening, the music of Chopin lifted the choreography of Jerome Robbins into moments of startling beauty in the hour-long *Dances at a Gathering*.

Mirrored beauty informed Mikael Persbrandt's Interpretation of the title role of Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm's Don Juan (Lyceum). He struts and preens. A narcissus beyond self-judgement. Director and choreographer Mats Ek is an all-time festival great. This is his finest dramatic offering. His production adjusts rather than adapts Mollere's original. The Frenchman provided the venom but Mats gives it rhythm. Bodies swarm onto a surgical table of

a set. Transplantation of ideas occur. In the end, it is a seamed-together body of images with disturbing depth.

Across the city, Stuttgart State Opera also use modern set and dress for their production of Handel's 1734 opera *Alcina*. This allows the sexual undertones of the plot a new resonance.

Sometimes the transsexual convolutions are distracting but the music enslaves the senses. The stage direction and dramaturgy are shared by Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito. They are wonderfully served by Catherine Naglestad in the title role. One hopes that McMaster can cajole all of them to return in the near future.

The second week's theatre opened with the New York company Sitt presenting *Cabin Pressure* "conceived by Anne Bogart". Pirandello pages Noel Coward at the start of this overdrawn drama school exercise. All style, no substance. For an hour and a half, I attempted to forget the word 'pretentious'. No longer.

The Book Festival continues

with some startling near confrontations. Andrea Dworkin applauded the wife who murdered her child-molesting husband. In sharp contrast, Doris Lessing spoke of reconciliation. She also attacked ageism.

Earlier in the same week, Brenda Maddox spoke in lecture mode of Yeats' wife, Georgie. A dark-suited man in the audience questioned her emphasis on the 'automatic writings' as opposed to contemporary events in Ireland. She curtly dismissed him. He rose again to identify himself as Daniel Mulhall, Irish Consul General to Scotland. She backtracked. Image rather than argument was allowed to rule the day.

So it is across the city. *The Scotsman*, a paper with a proud record in relation to festival reportage, has cut back on what its managing director calls "the luvvies". One-liners with asterisks (four for 'banal', one for 'bad' and foreign) fill the pages. But despite the diluted commentaries, this month still remains the world's greatest celebration of conceit and cerebral entertainment.