

## Edinburgh at its edgiest

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### Scots are wild for the Fringe

By Joanna Kakissis, Globe Correspondent | July 30, 2006

EDINBURGH -- Bare-chested and muscular, shaking their William Wallace-length hair to the beat of pounding drums, the band of sweaty men in kilts normally would have stopped passersby in this majestic city.

But since it was August, the month Edinburgh hosts the annual Festival Fringe, the world's largest alternative arts event, the would-be Bravehearts had to contend with thousands of other kinetic and otherwise head-turning artists on the historic stretch known as the Royal Mile.

The wild-haired Scots drummed and danced their way into a courtyard corner, drowned out by a crowd of performers that included fire-juggling Australians, Dutch unicyclists, fake American hippies singing "Give Peace a Chance," and painted Korean dancers interpreting "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is the loudest and largest of the city's summer festivals, which draw more than 2.5 million people annually to this city of crags and castles. Nearly half that number are drawn to the nearly 60-year-old Fringe, which this year will feature almost 17,000 artists giving 28,000 performances at some 260 venues around Edinburgh. A big economic boon for Edinburgh and Scotland, the Fringe brings in about \$131 million of the \$236 million generated by the Edinburgh festivals and has inspired more than 40 other festivals around the world, including at least 12 in the United States.

While many Edinburgh residents flee for the lochs during festival time to escape the crowds, traffic, and blue-faced middle-aged men impersonating Wallace, the 13th-century revolutionary brought to life in Mel Gibson's movie, this city of 453,000 makes sure that Scottish history remains the star of the show.

Edinburgh's skyline includes neoclassical columns, the extinct volcano plug known as Arthur's Seat, and Edinburgh Castle, the home of the Scottish crown, scepter, and sword of state. A literary pub tour features stops at watering holes such as the Beehive Inn, which once hosted William Wordsworth and Scotland's favorite poet, Robert Burns.

At the Beehive and other pubs, including The Rabbin Burns on the Royal Mile, traditional haggis stacked with neeps and tatties (parsnips and potatoes) will always be on the menu. A dish of minced and spiced sheep liver cooked in a sheep stomach, haggis probably became the seminal Scottish dish in the 18th century when Burns wrote the poem "The Address to a Haggis."

"In spite of being a city that wears its past very proudly, Edinburgh welcomes visitors warmly, even indiscriminately," said Katy Stephan, a California singer who accompanied a US theater group last year. "You only have to look down from the castle, as I did, and see those beautiful, ancient streets crowded with unicycling, juggling, singing, dancing tourists to realize that no other city on earth has opened its arms to theater freaks the way Edinburgh has."

The Fringe was started in 1947, when the Edinburgh International Festival began as a way to culturally unite postwar Europe. That year, eight uninvited British theater companies crashed the international festival and the lineup of performers has grown ever since.

Even in August, Edinburgh is sometimes chilly, cloudy, and scented with rain, though judging from the crowds last year no one cared. Each morning, the Royal Mile teemed with people, many of whom were either starting the day fresh-faced or haggardly winding down the previous night.

The Royal Mile, blocked to traffic, was a stage for bagpipe serenades, a capella groups, klezmer orchestras, acrobats, comedians, raconteurs, martial arts drummers, and a ponytailed Australian juggling what

appeared to be medieval cleavers. Tourists from all over the world sat on the curb and watched, eating takeaway fish and chips and, occasionally, a snack of a Mars bar dipped into that same fish batter and deep fried.

And that was just the unbilled show. The official listing of Fringe programming comes in a catalog of more than 200 pages . Theater offerings, for instance, include the likes of Shakespeare and Brecht as well as modern originals such as ``We Don't Know Shi'ite," which explores how little the British know about Islam.

If you are a music freak, you will never be bored. This year, the lineup includes British alt- crooners Keane, '80s popster Howard Jones, the Nashville- based indie- experimentalists Lambchop, and fiery Scottish jigsters Deaf Shepherd. A funky club called the Medina also offers a sampling of the best emerging or local musicians as part of its Fringe acoustic series. And comedy, now one of the Fringe's signature categories, attracts some of the world's best rising performers who compete for the Perrier Award . Many Fringe shows are free or cost a little more than \$12, though headliner acts are double that or more.

On our final day at last year's Fringe, we followed the warrior- drummers, who were pounding out a beat to a healthy crowd . Clan an Drumma (Children of the Drum) will play the Fringe's stages next month with several other Scottish drummers . With record crowds expected , one band of tribal drummers just isn't enough.

Contact Joanna Kakissis, a writer in Athens, at [joannakakissis@mac.com](mailto:joannakakissis@mac.com). ■

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