



Brighton Festival 2008

a selective memory by

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A white horse stands silent and dangerously huge in a crowded basement, occasionally turning its long face to look at us looking at him then turning back again to watch the wall. This is the living backcloth to Fevered Sleep's *An Infinite Line*, specially commissioned for the Brighton Festival 2008, and in one image sums up the incongruity and relaxed power of the indefinable arena for all the arts that this extraordinary Festival has become.

An Infinite Line is not a play, or a concert, or an exhibition, or a circus, nor is it a mixture of all of these. It is a hymn to the changing colours of Brighton, using words, film, lighting, mirrors, water and a white horse, to paint a picture of the sea-washed city, at once familiar and completely strange. At times it seems unduly slack, as if the performers have lost interest, then the horse quietly clacks its hooves and ruffles its main, and suddenly the sea crashes and wind roars.

A similar feeling of intimacy and confined power was evoked in the cello-playing of Steven Isserlis as almost alone he swathed us in John Tavener's *Protecting Veil*, with the City of London Sinfonia bearing him up on a sea of strings then leaving him alone again, pondering the meditative depths of the *Mother of God*. The extreme religiousness of the second half of the Tavener programme was hard for some to take and there were walk-outs in the Mass for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The Credo belted out by a massed choir like a football crowd, then the delicate insistent dying fall of the Prayers intoned by the Priest from the midst of the congregation, showed the power of unquestioning massed belief and the ability of repetitive pleading to get under the skin. The Mass was a UK premiere, from an ancient form, sung mostly in Latin. The *Protecting Veil*, 'a lyrical icon in sound, rather than in wood' as Tavener describes it, was premiered in 1989, just as the Iron Curtain was coming down. Yet both in the massive bowl of the Brighton Dome, using all corners of it, had an unavoidable 21st Century edge, complementing and contrasting with other uniquely one-off events, great and small, that filled the Festival programme.

Special commissions, or the 'Brightonizing' of classic works, in specific sites, the intimate and domestic alongside the global and fantastical, have become the defining measure of this, the biggest and most diverse arts Festival in England. High risk is the unifying factor, from the imaginative leap of transforming your own home into a public gallery – Artists' Open Houses, to the Brighton-inspired *Happy Together*, from the *Shout* and *Protein Dance*, a city-wide evocation of hen and stag parties that was so risky it never happened.

And in the streets, where the Brighton Festival has always delighted both its own and its visitors with real panache, as well as the customary opening and closing events, this year we had *Fringe City*, echoing Edinburgh's *Fringe Sunday*. On a variety of stages, and all for free, all ages danced to the multi-talented Brighton School of Samba, and laughed with the *Top Bananas*, amongst the many artists showcasing their work in the successfully pedestrianised areas of the city.

The Artists' Open Houses, themselves a Festival within a Festival, showed the work of over a thousand artists in 221 venues, from Ellie Sampson's *Beach Hut* in Hove – 'prints, paintings and drawings, seeing the extraordinary in the familiar' – to Romany Mark Bruce's *No Back Door*, with its ecstatic multicoloured nudes, and the *Smallest Cinema in the World* in a cupboard in the basement, showing short films about Brighton. Bruce's open house led to a wonderful exhibition in the Library where he gave us an insight into his commission to sculpt the Brighton Aids Memorial.

A film that could well have been shown in the Smallest Cinema was Art:House from Home Grown Films, about the phenomenal 'string of jewels' that is the Artists' Open Houses. This film was made 'in a back room, at home' and points, with its subject, to a cottage arts industry, that is quietly booming everywhere you look in this Festival.

Even Pizza Express had been taken over by a new style of breakfast service offering Shakespeare A La Carte, with waiters and the chef becoming the Rude Mechanicals from A Midsummer Night's Dream, then roaring through Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Henry V, playing love games from As You Like It and Much Ado with smouldering or flaming snatches of Hamlet and Lear. This was Shakespeare as he indeed would have liked it, in the lap of the audience, among food, with nothing but the bravura of the performers, the brilliance of the words, and the delight of the audience, to carry it through.

Three other dramas, out of the hundreds advertised on the main and the fringe programmes, illustrate the wealth of diversity, and the extravagant or minimalist, cross-overs between genres. Stockholm was a play by Bryony Lavery and a dance by Frantic Assembly. Two actors made love upside-down on the stairs, then tangled with each other in a relentless downward spiral of doomed passion. The result was curiously uninvolved, because the couple seemed to have no interest beyond each other, and the language was irredeemably dull, especially compared with the richness of the equally doomed passions we had thrilled to at breakfast.

The gargantuan cathedral-like St Bartholemew's, was an apt setting for The Bootmaker's Daughter, the story of the youngest of the 16th century Lewes martyrs, in a series of scenes played in different parts of the church to the Tudor tones of the Cardinal's Musick. At the other end of the scale, in a solo performance, in a tent, Lady of Burma showed Aung San Suu Kyi enduring a similar living martyrdom that continues today. Both women stood by their beliefs against despotic and dangerously unstable regimes and suffered accordingly and there was never a moment of doubt as to whose side you should be on. One wanted to see an Antigone or a St Joan in these women which was surely there – these were powerful performances – and a more combative 'other side of the argument', to lift these plays out of mere spectacle or harangue, into the realm of human tragedy.

Debate is central to the Brighton Festival programme and in recent years, the literary section has been partnered by the Charleston Festival, with Brighton, the urban half, leaning towards politics and debate, and Charleston, down on the farm, digging into the rich soil from which books grow. On the urban front, everyone had been jostling to hear Gore Vidal in conversation with Andrew Marr at the Dome. Here was an American, one third as old as the USA itself, who had been at the forefront of cinema, politics and books, as America stormed through the 20th century and into the 21st. What wisdom would he impart? Who would challenge his outrageously maverick views? From his wheelchair, to the polite questioning of Marr, he gave short, expected answers and the debate, alas never took off. For the flagship event of the Books and Debate section, perhaps the form needs to be toughened, into a Reith-style lecture or a formal heavyweight debate between such as Vidal and Chomsky.

Meanwhile, up at Charleston, to a tented, senior audience, Diane Athill (91) and Katharine Whitehorn (80), discussed the Seventh Age, ably chaired by Lynne Truss. The Seventh was never going to be an age 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste'. Bite, vision and discernment were sharp as ever both on the platform and in the audience. Memory, though selective, and views of present and future were unconventional and uninhibited.

It was the boys' turn in the evening, when Michael Billington, Christopher Hampton and William Nicholson took over the tent, to discuss theatre as the barometer for the state of the nation. Here an air of friendliness and senior male bonding gave a fair and relaxed picture of the past, but little to go on for the future. As you would expect at a literary festival, it was the writer who was the prime mover. Directors, actors, designers, composers, were deemed secondary to the growth of theatre. And as for chocolate...

Dousing in a tub of champagne-spiked liquid chocolate is one way of dragging theatrical theory into practice. Amanda Waring in the Regency splendour of the Hanbury Club, sang, danced, paddled and bathed with un-British panache through For the Love of Chocolate. Here taste, in its most literal, gustatory form, triumphed over teeth and eyes.

Larger and further removed, two dance pieces in the Dome, told stories that informed and entertained but failed to touch. *Metamorphoses* from the Ballet Nationale de Marseille, retold in a cleanly disciplined style, several of the transformation stories of Ovid. The spectacle was inventive and circus-like, but one rarely sensed any dramatic moments of change.

Akram Khan led the National Ballet of China in a multinational dance to the music of Nitin Sawhney. Here in an airport-style transit-lounge, dancers from different cultures and traditions presented a Babel of language and movement, timeless and modern in the same extended moment, whether dreaming of the future, caught in the present, or longing for home.

You can never see all that you want to see in this densely-programmed, three-week Festival, and part of the delight of Festival-going is discovering the variety of journeys that have been taken from the opening performance – Ballet de Marseille – to the closing concert of Jonathan Harvey’s *Tranquil Abiding* and Mahler’s *Resurrection Symphony*. This double-bill was a perfect home-coming for the massed ranks of festival pilgrims, whether they had done more of the drama, or more of the dance, or more of the street performances and open houses. *Tranquil Abiding* is a moment caught in time, both rapturous and contemplative, and raises the spirits to make you ready for the journey from gloom to glory in the Mahler, so that when finally, the cymbal crash, the tympani thunder and choir bursts forth, Brighton, having shown off the brilliant, the good, the less good and the bad, and been judged and counter-judged, can canter off on its white horse into the summer sun.

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