

Edinburgh's a stage of sizeable assets

SCOTLAND

EDINBURGH is best known as the festival city. For three weeks of the year the streets overflow with visitors, and church halls, school gyms, university buildings and every other available space is crammed with wooden chairs and makeshift stages as the city strives to accommodate the 500 plus fringe productions that take place every year.

Outside August, it is much quieter, some might even say staid, but this reputation belies the choice of theatre that the city can offer all year round. Edinburgh has a wealth of venues and with the opening of the Festival Theatre, Edinburgh's long awaited opera house, it can now boast one theatre with the biggest stage in Europe and another, the Playhouse, with the biggest seating capacity.

The last few years have seen an enormous amount of money being put into theatre as a whole, besides the £21 million Festival Theatre development. The Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh's repertory theatre, has been extensively refurbished and now boasts an elegant glass-fronted foyer and a regilded and restored 900 seat interior. The theatre also has a new artistic director, Kenny Ireland, who took over in April of last year. Ireland has had a successful season with productions ranging from the melodramatic thrills and spills of *Gaslight* to a revival of his award winning promenade production of *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

One of his most successful ideas has been to bring in big Scottish names in the acting world as associate artists to develop their own productions with the Lyceum and to act as Ireland's eyes and ears beyond Edinburgh. "People approach Brian Cox, Phyllis Logan — people who are Scottish but who work in London — with projects because they are specifically Scots. They might not be able to do anything with them but they can pass the projects on." The scheme has already proved its success in two acclaimed productions, Brian Cox's realisation of Ibsen's *The Master Builder* and Bill Paterson's hilarious portrayal of Pooch in *A Mongrel's Heart*. Ireland plans to continue the scheme next season and also to start gently encouraging his audience to share his interest in new writing and in all things Scottish.

Just around the corner is a theatre that has made its name through promoting new writing. The Traverse, Britain's first studio theatre, started out as a club in 1963 to capture the spirit of the Festival all year round and to avoid the censure of the Lord Chamberlain and Edinburgh's punitive licensing laws. For many years it occupied a converted sailmaker's loft in the Grassmarket, producing early work by writers like Steven Berkoff, John Byrne and David Hare. It also acted as a springboard for directors including Max Stafford-Clark, Michael Rudman and Mike Ockrent and performers such as Simons, Callow, Donald and Russell Beale. In 1991 it moved to premises in the basement of a luxurious new office block underneath the castle, built on the site of Edinburgh's infamous hole-in-the-ground, a wasteland which for many years had been the proposed site for the opera house.

The new main theatre is what artistic director Ian Brown describes as "a machine in which we can create theatre." It has been purposely designed to be completely adaptable from proscenium arrangement to in the round without sacrificing the intimate feel of the original Traverse. Brown feels that the flexibility of the space will allow the Traverse to be even more experimental.

A bigger theatre has meant more artistic scope but also an increase in seats to fill from 100 to 350. However, Brown believes the new theatre has attracted new audiences, who may have been put off by the cliquish atmosphere of the old Traverse, without alienating any of the old committed Traverse regulars.

The Traverse and the Lyceum with their established audiences should, perhaps, have least worries about the opening of the Festival Theatre across town. However both Ireland and Brown express concerns over the financial aspects of increased competition. "I don't really think that it will affect us as much as people think," says Ireland. "But I think it's just another drain on people's pockets." Chris Potter, manager of the King's, which perhaps has most to lose with the opening of the Festival Theatre, is determinedly optimistic. "I believe the more there is the more people actually go out. Edinburgh really has an enormous choice."

FRANCES CORNFORD *checks out the capital's venues*

The King's Theatre is district council owned and directly funded by the Recreation Department. In the past the elegant and much loved former musical hall has staged a mixture of opera, ballet and music productions.

"We're not promoting the same sorts of things as they are," says Potter of the Festival Theatre, whose new programme is heavily dance and opera based. "What we're trying to do, and with some success I may say, is build up an audience for high quality drama. We've just had Richard Briers and Paul Eddington in *Home*, Lady Windermere's Fan is coming with Francesca Annis and Peter Hall's *Hamlet* in the autumn — plays of that quality."

While the King's will lose Scottish Ballet and Scottish Opera to the Festival Theatre there seems to be no shortage of alternative productions to fill the gaps. Small scale musicals like *The Boyfriend*, *Great Expectations* and *Five Guys Named Moe* are lined up for the future as well as drama productions with stars like Patricia Routledge and Hayley Mills.

While the King's is carving out a niche for itself in drama, the Playhouse, Edinburgh's other large receiving theatre, is concentrating on musicals. The Playhouse, is owned by Apollo Leisure. With over 3000 seats to sell every night manager Cormac Rennick has to think big.

"We like to think that as a company our speciality is the major musicals," he says. "Joseph with Phillip Schofield is going to be our Christmas show this year. When Phantom of the Opera stops selling tickets for us in Manchester we will take it in Edinburgh. The other thing that we continue to do is major concerts."

The company is showing its commitment to the building with a major refurbishment programme. Rennick is confident that the new improved Playhouse can hold its own. "There's a new kid on the block and I think what it does mean is that everybody has to look to their laurels. There's no room for any venue in Edinburgh to become complacent whether myself as the largest or even some of the smaller venues. Because you've introduced an element of consumer choice everybody's got to fight that little bit harder for a piece of the cake but I think it's exciting."

While the big venues are working on creating a definite identity for themselves, smaller venues, by necessity, have already done so. The King's and the Playhouse may concentrate on attracting stars from the West End but smaller Edinburgh theatres are cultivating local talent and ensuring that there is no shortage of the new and unusual.

Theatre Workshop in Stockbridge can be counted on during the Fringe as a venue for avant garde international theatre. Its commitment to the experimental continues in the rest of the year with a programme that supports new theatre groups and new writing. The Netherbow Theatre in the High Street is the base for the Scottish Storytelling Festival and has also strong links with the Puppet and Animation Festival. For the past four and a half years it has been the home of Fifth Estate Theatre Company, which has become well known for its successful productions of new Scottish plays like George Rosie's *Carluccio* and the Queen of Hearts.

Musselburgh, five miles outside Edinburgh, has its own repertory theatre in the shape of the Brunton Theatre. This has gradually increased its programme until there is now seven months of new and old plays of remarkable quality with a loyal following both locally and farther afield as well as productions for the Festival and Fringe. East Lothian district council, not to be outdone by Edinburgh, are about to start a major building and improvement work on the venue.

Investment in theatre buildings seems to be at a high point in Edinburgh. With the Festival restored to its former glory, the Playhouse bedecked with new chandeliers and the Lyceum regilded there is no shortage of elegant surroundings in which to enjoy theatre in the city.