

THE TIMES



THURSDAY AUGUST 10 1989

Printed in Scotland

Is that a Rowan Atkinson with the chainsaw?

In the first of our special reports from the 1989 Edinburgh Festival, Kristina Woolnough surveys the prospects for the Fringe

Critics and punters alike love sniping at the Edinburgh Fringe. There are the annual complaints that the satire was sharper, the Ibsen bleaker, the street happenings zanier, the church halls seedier, back in the good old 1960s. The grumbles are as much part of being at the world's largest open-to-all arts festival as the masochistic pleasure of realizing that one has bought a ticket for a terrible show.

This year, so far, the censorious voices have been strangely silent, yet they have as much reason for complaint as in the past. There is an over-abundance of cabaret, and much of the theatre is unimaginatively chosen. Moreover, some of the Fringe performers take such

a heavy, professional attitude to Edinburgh, and charge such hefty ticket prices, that they might as well be in the official festival.

Though the Fringe is meant to be spontaneous, original and innovative, many cabaret acts and plays have been well tested elsewhere. Some performers, already basking in the glow of commercial success, are guaranteed full houses. For them, Edinburgh in August simply adds a little *avant garde* piquancy to their established careers.

This year more than any other, companies have made concerted efforts to present preview shows all over Britain. Fringe regulars like the Joan Collins Fan Club, Donna & Kebab, Jeremy Hardy and Will Gaines are warming up at the South Bank Advance Warming Festival, while other familiar names and Fringe safe-bets (Hull Truck, Oxford Review, Earl Okin) are appearing at the Newcastle Arts Festival's *See It First In Newcastle* season. With a modicum of success on the Fringe already assured, the concept of



One of Archaios, with chainsaw

risk may have flown forever. Post-Fringe festivals also confirm that the visit to Edinburgh is now just part of the professional circuit.

The feeling of hand-me-down clothes is hard to shake off. Yet Fringe administrator, Mhairi Mackenzie Robinson takes a more

positive line: "I suppose it's good publicity for the Fringe, and it helps to build up impetus before the Fringe starts."

The Fringe Society, exclusively an organisational body, has no control over what performers do before coming to Edinburgh or over what they bring to Edinburgh. The open door policy is frequently misunderstood by the public. "People assume that I go round in the winter seeing shows and picking them out. Once people understand the free and open nature of the Fringe, they seem to feel better and they realize they have to take the rough with the smooth," says Mackenzie Robinson.

But for all the laboured presentations of Shakespeare, the re-writes of Joan of Arc's life and the hip productions of Berkoff, there are still unexpected nuggets. With 500 companies appearing, the Fringe is huge enough to defy generalization. Most of the performers are not polished professionals, and their offerings will be as untruly and unpredictable as

ever. What is more, the surprises may not always be edifying. The number of times "bunk" appears in this year's programme is quite unprecedented.

Amongst the current crop, promising perverseness if nothing else, is the "comedy" double act God and Jesus, whose press release runs "Attention scum, you are nothing. Absolutely nothing." There is a bizarre clutch of plays taking Siamese twins as their subject. And of course there is the usual crop of feminist interpretations: this year, Andy Pandey, Windy Miller and Punch and Judy get the radical chic treatment.

The "spot the new Rowan Atkinson" game retains its fascination for both public and press. Tips for front runners this year include Red Shift's *Frida and Diego - A Love Story* (reportedly performed in a cattle truck), Theatre Caddis's *Eric*, the chainsaw-wielding biker circus Archaios and comedy duo Robert Llewelyn and John McKay.

But at some point in the next three weeks a kind of buzz will go round the bars and restaurants about an amazing, unknown newcomer, and another star might be made. That is what the Fringe is all about.