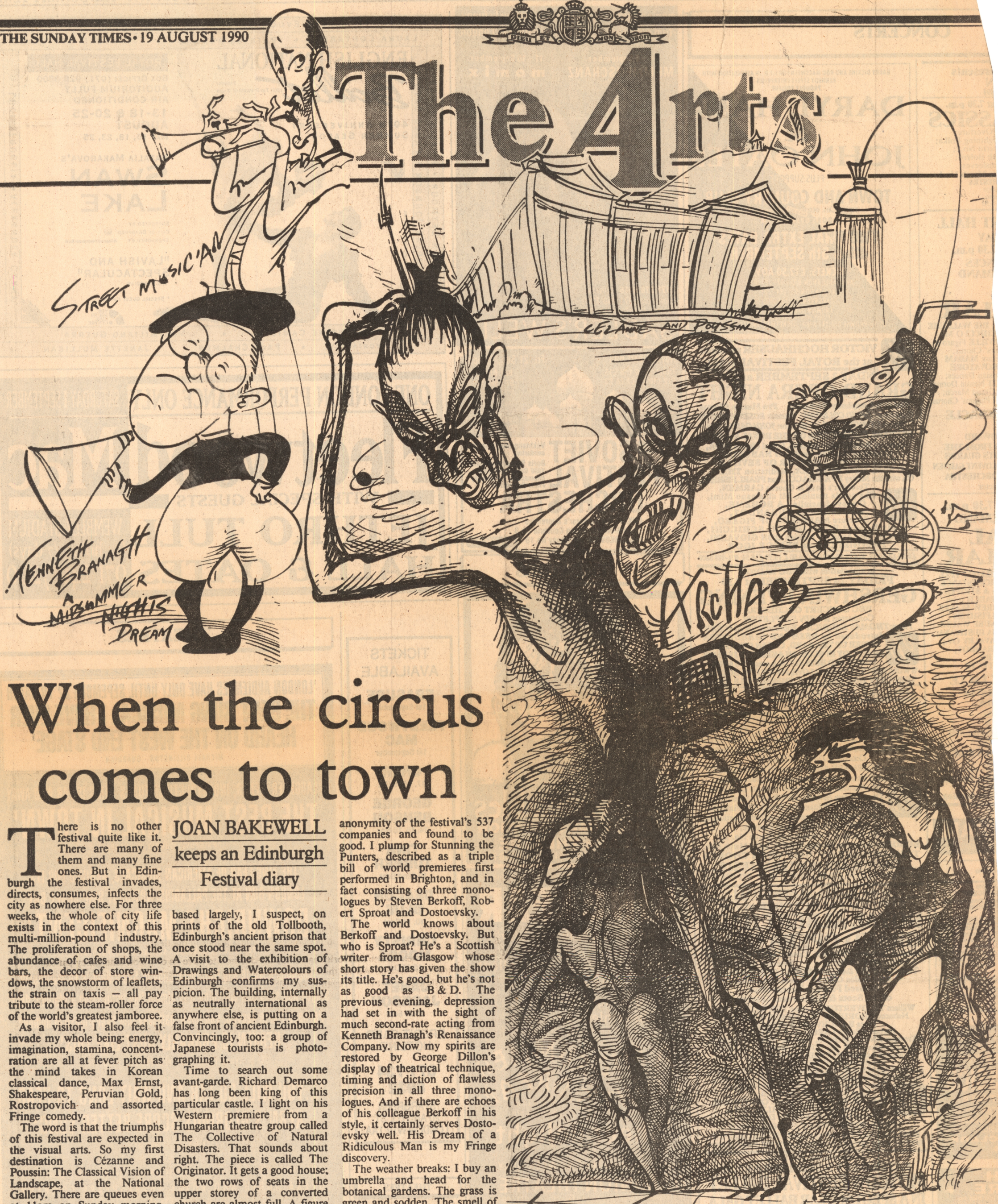


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The Arts



When the circus comes to town

There is no other festival quite like it. There are many of them and many fine ones. But in Edinburgh the festival invades, directs, consumes, infects the city as nowhere else. For three weeks, the whole of city life exists in the context of this multi-million-pound industry. The proliferation of shops, the abundance of cafes and wine bars, the decor of store windows, the snowstorm of leaflets, the strain on taxis — all pay tribute to the steam-roller force of the world's greatest jamboree.

As a visitor, I also feel it invade my whole being: energy, imagination, stamina, concentration are all at fever pitch as the mind takes in Korean classical dance, Max Ernst, Shakespeare, Peruvian Gold, Rostropovich and assorted Fringe comedy.

The word is that the triumphs of this festival are expected in the visual arts. So my first destination is Cézanne and Poussin: The Classical Vision of Landscape, at the National Gallery. There are queues even at 11am on Sunday morning. The show is satisfying on several levels. It is attractively hung, intellectually nourishing and exhilarating in the sheer pleasure of its pictures. I am struck by Poussin's 1647 painting of the philosopher Diogenes who, having reduced his worldly possessions to a cloak and a drinking bowl, throws the bowl aside when he sees a young man drinking from his hands. I take the point and stride out, unfettered, to enjoy the streets and landscapes of Edinburgh itself.

Sadly, I am brought to a halt by a surprising sight in the Royal Mile. Where last year there was only a building site and scaffolding, there is now what seems to be a medieval building. The new Scandic Crown Hotel is a Disneyland confection catering to tourists,

JOAN BAKEWELL
keeps an Edinburgh
Festival diary

based largely, I suspect, on prints of the old Tollbooth, Edinburgh's ancient prison that once stood near the same spot. A visit to the exhibition of Drawings and Watercolours of Edinburgh confirms my suspicion. The building, internally as neutrally international as anywhere else, is putting on a false front of ancient Edinburgh. Convincingly, too: a group of Japanese tourists is photographing it.

Time to search out some avant-garde. Richard Demarco has long been king of this particular castle. I light on his Western premiere from a Hungarian theatre group called The Collective of Natural Disasters. That sounds about right. The piece is called The Originator. It gets a good house: the two rows of seats in the upper storey of a converted church are almost full. A figure sits on top of a white column facing rows of what look like melons lit from within. Slowly, she unfolds the drama of birth. At first I perceive a chicken emerging from its egg, then a butterfly from its chrysalis. A hermit crab quivers, vulnerable and palpitating. A new-born lamb struggles to clamber to its feet. The woman's body gives birth to a shrivelled Homunculus. The only sound is a growing cacophony of primal noises. Only sometimes in this mesmerising 40 minutes do I touch reality and see a girl in a body-stocking writhing in scum and mess on the floor of a Fringe venue at 10.30 in the morning.

Everyone likes to make their own discovery at the festival — some show or performance plucked on a whim from the

anonymity of the festival's 537 companies and found to be good. I plump for Stunning the Punters, described as a triple bill of world premieres first performed in Brighton, and in fact consisting of three monologues by Steven Berkoff, Robert Sproat and Dostoevsky.

The world knows about Berkoff and Dostoevsky. But who is Sproat? He's a Scottish writer from Glasgow whose short story has given the show its title. He's good, but he's not as good as B & D. The previous evening, depression had set in with the sight of much second-rate acting from Kenneth Branagh's Renaissance Company. Now my spirits are restored by George Dillon's display of theatrical technique, timing and diction of flawless precision in all three monologues. And if there are echoes of his colleague Berkoff in his style, it certainly serves Dostoevsky well. His Dream of a Ridiculous Man is my Fringe discovery.

The weather breaks: I buy an umbrella and head for the botanical gardens. The grass is green and sodden. The smell of silver limes hangs over Andy Goldsworthy's Slate Hole Wall, a permanent work set up in a remote corner. It is a circular dry-stone wall surrounding a slate dome rising to a single hole. I touch it. You're not meant to, but just a touch. It is dry and cold and sturdy, solid as the ages, destined to stand with Scotland's other stones, pre-historic and post-historic together.

I grow conscious as the week proceeds of the scale of a Scottish presence at this festival. A major exhibition, Scotland's Pictures, pools the best of the nation's paintings: Dynasty portrays the House of Stewart, Treasure Island gets a rumbustious if slightly disappointing production, and even Adam Smith, 200 years after his death, has his own show at the Royal

● Gerald Scarfe's festival notebook: from the classical temples of Poussin and Kenneth Branagh's bard to the chainsaw massacres of the French circus group Archaos

Museum. It is there, under the heading Division of Labour, that I find two children checking out his theories. One is colouring a drawing systematically, all the reds first, then all the blues. The other is doing it simply as he pleases, all the colours mixed. Mother explains Smith's point: division of labour, concentration on one function, is quicker, but soon gets boring for those doing it. An allegory for the festival.

This year Edinburgh has

shared the visit of the Bolshoi Opera with Glasgow's Year of Culture. In fact, it may well have scooped the best treat of the lot. Sheridan's The Duenna is transformed by Prokofiev into a witty lyrical opera. Here it is stylishly produced, its tender magic stealing slowly upon you towards a triumphantly happy final act. A festival already distinguished by the Cézanne-Poussin show will also linger in the memory as the year of the Bolshoi Duenna.