

the question? Have we changed enough to maintain a relevance? I mean if I read Michael Barnes statement from the '70s he would be talking there about the Festival steering a neutral course through the Troubles, now I don't see that as our role at all now in 2001, because that implies a lack of engagement so I think what we have to be about is an informed, intelligent engagement which is the opposite of neutrality. We will try and be even-handed but I don't think we can be neutral, we have to engage with people from various different perspectives and try to find a way of reflecting those perspectives and that's a very active process."

And there's the problem that faces Stella Hall just as much as it faces every Festival director across the country, but which has a special urgency in Belfast. Who exactly is the Festival engaging with? The traditional South Belfast audience, which like Dublin-1 may be as much a state of mind as a geographical reality? The wider city? Or an international audience keen to explore cultural life in the (more) peaceful Belfast?

This year's Festival programme was launched in the City Hall, the first time that venue had been used and a small sign perhaps that the event will, in time,

embrace the entire city. But search the programme for events that genuinely reflect the social and political realities of Belfast in 2001 and the fruits of that search are thin on the ground. Yes, there's Tinderbox's 'No Place Like Home', a collaborative drama examining the constant flux of people on the move within Northern Ireland, the sectarian tensions created by ghettos, a Willie Doherty exhibition at the Ormeau Baths Gallery and Rita Duffy's huge project with the residents of Divis Flats to illuminate Divis Tower as the Festival's finale, but that's about it as far as strong locally produced work that speaks of Belfast life in the year 2001.

Cultural diversity is recognised with greater involvement from Belfast's Indian community, particularly in the series of films at the QFT and there are several events with a Japanese theme—Belfast's share of Japan 2001 which has been in Britain all year. All well and good but surely there's a greater cultural diversity, or rather a lack of cultural diversity that the Festival might tackle?

This year Stella Hall as much as the Belfast Festival itself will be judged on this mix of the familiar, the unusual and the culturally diverse. Life begins as forty? We shall see. ♦

## Something for everyone?

**T**he Belfast Festival at Queen's is back in late October. Due to the astonishing ugliness of the programme cover (an aerial blur of the city purely for the aesthetically impaired) which may put off some, highlights are here noted.

**Theatre:** An entire sub festival of Japanese shows are scheduled; including **The Theft of Sita** which contains shadow puppetry. **The Tea Ceremony** is purported to offer some insight into the Geisha culture. The Festival has other prickly surprises in its quiver. A tale of aboriginal society's survival is to be told in **Stolen**; and the 2001 Edinburgh Fringe Winners Unlimited Theatre bring their anti-war polemic **Statie** to the Old Museum Arts Centre.

The echo-park atrium of Clamnil Housing is a novel choice of venue for a new production of **Salome**. There is some real outdoor theatre, though only for the brave—**Decky does a Bronco** will take place in several city playgrounds. Promising. Should it rain all attending will doubtless relieve local concerned residents of their cars and make their way to MacDs to have a warming face-full of donkey dung and scree.

**Visual Art:** Lumina, Ten Men Artists and Overnight Sensation constitute certain of the visual artists. The fascinating Divis Flats project, entitled 'Drawing the Blinds', will make art spectacle out of these planning policy catastrophes. The exhibition is scheduled for the final night of the Festival.

Tom Halifax is a wonderful choice of Artist in Residence at the Ulster Museum. His bold painting and unstuffy approach make his work very accessible.

**Film:** There are some dreadful choices on the

programme. **Gardens of the World**, anyone? It is a tour of, well, gardens throughout the world. Narrated by Audrey Hepburn. Right. Who is this for? Those about to die, or those already dead?

One wonders if **Girl on a Motorcycle** would have been screened at all were it not for the imminent attendance at the screening of **Marianne Faithfull**. It possesses nil interest.

There are some wonderful screenings in the programme though. See the absolutely necessary Takeshi Kitano in **Hana-Bi**. Likewise **Ghost in the Shell**, the most cohesive manga since **Akira**. And if you have not seen **Seven Samurai** yet do go—for Toshiro Mifune's obdurate hero and the masterful pace set by Kurosawa. **Night of the Hunter** is the first

**CIAN O'NEILL** casts a cold and critical eye over this year's Festival programme

Camping it up—Les Ballets Trockadero





Manga mania—*Ghost in the Shell*

great American thriller and a cinematic lodestar of sublime abstraction.

Book early for *The Bandit Queen* as no doubt the Womens' Studies crew will have the QFT choked with tartan and not a bra amongst them. As for the all night *War and Peace* event in The Golden Thread Theatre, a fully licensed bar and Ulster fry is provided. What the exhibitors will not give the patrons is a family and some friends. This is an omission.

**Classical Music:** Soloist David Quigley is to be recommended and not only for his having survived Birmingham with his smile intact. The 'One Day Production' *Mikado* should be amusing. Yet More Japanese offerings appear in The Sapporo (brewer?) Symphony Orchestra and Ensemble Tozai. The Saturday Morning Coffee Concerts' return, with free sherry for all who attend. Go along to catch the après-match pissed brawl of dysphasic Malone Road dearies disputing superlative portamenti.

**Traditional/Folk:** Several acts lined up including one of the Sands brothers (Colum) who plays with Sharon Aviv. Ah, the ineluctable presence of the Rostrevor brothers, smiling winsomely. Apparently anywhere there is found a fiddle. The Award for the most calamitous nomenclature in the entire Festival goes jointly to groups 'Blackhorn' and 'Brier'. They sound like bespoke brands of cider. One of them perhaps already is. Their well-toured and reputed sets should, however, make amends.

**Contemporary Music:** Belfast's Van the Angry Baby Man returns to the Waterfront to remind us that he is still much interested in visiting Belfast.

"A seductive tale of high adventure"—*The Theft of Sita*



And then leaving again. Very quickly. It is to be hoped that he will stay awake. His recent attendance of the QUB summer graduation ceremony for receipt of a music doctorate was as somnambulant as his recent albums.

Lee 'Scratch' Perry is worth trying to see. Caveat—only in the generic sense will he actually be present. Likewise Roots Manuva, another 'tree' lover whose 'Witness' single was a highlight of the Summer. Bonnie Prince Billy will be the most impossibly cool gig in the Festival. Arts students you have been warned.

Mogwai are still a force of sorts—ignore the programme blurb and its talk of 'frontier beards' (?) Speedy] (Warp) plays the Limelight. The Frames are back, ever wonderful and so recommended. Musical polyglot Nitin Sawhney's gig is where the smart money is. With a voice the texture of a kitten's tongue, Diana Krall is where the Inn's at.

Lastly, the combination of Seamus Heaney and Liam O'Flynn in one Waterfront show is appetitive to just about anyone. This will surely be popular, stand advised.

**Comedy:** Leave the 'FHM Comedy Tour' to the Gentlemen who Scrum, and do see Jack Dee or the imperative Scott Capurro for something worthwhile. Let us simply hope that in his show Jack does not attack poor Vanessa Feltz. For it is the gods who mock at her.

**Workshops/Talks:** The Drawing the Blinds project will be presaged by Rita Duffy inviting secondary year 10 and 11 students to four half day workshops. A 'Hitchhikers Guide to the Festival' has been organized by the Institute for Lifelong Learning, which will offer a guided tour of varied events as well as take participants back stage. The Belfast Print Workshop also offers an introduction to the mysterious and secretive world of potato printing. Several intriguing pre and post show talks will take place including one for the aforementioned 'Sita' performance.

**Talks:** Simon Singh will talk about *The Code Book*, Enigma et al. Novelist Eoin MacNamee provides local representation, alongside poet Paul Durcan.

Also upcoming—some Ulster Museum Lectures. This writer for one will be at the front of the Douglas Hurd talk. Taking time off from cultivating his forehead, Mr. Hurd has kindly offered to take up some of the time left us on this earth to answer the (well, his) question "Was It Really Like That?"

The answer, Mr Hurd, is that "We Don't Care". And as for attending the insipid Clare Raynor's talk, I had rather have a clay enema. That one could not say of the festival, in the main. That it is such a varied thing is perhaps the sole concern one could have. There is no apparent theme, no sense of whole. The Japanese content should have been more clearly appointed its own space in the programme and schedule. Perhaps this question is peripheral. Once more have the Festival Staff evinced an expansive ambition, and succeeded in providing a season which should happily satisfy a range of interests.

One more serious and final question is why the negotiable payment scheme has been dropped. This makes the Queen's Festival too expensive for the very people who constitute the University population and need to see the shows—the students. ♦