

# **Celebrating Enterprise Festival Futures Seminar Series**

## **Culture and Commerce: Making the Marriage Work**

Rich Mix, Bethnal Green Road  
25 January 2007

### Introduction

This seminar aimed to tackle head-on the issue of enterprise and income-generation at cultural festivals. It asked questions about the variety of different ways enterprise and entrepreneurs could be involved in outdoor cultural events like festivals and carnivals. Presenters described the motivations for and benefits of doing this, and considered the issue of a potential clash between cultural and creative aspirations and economic considerations. The different case studies confirmed the huge variety of possible models for combining culture and commerce through festivals and markets, and painted a vibrant and positive picture of new initiatives, demonstrating that, not only is it possible to combine economic and creative agendas in a pragmatic sense, but that the combined energy of entrepreneurial activity and creative work can produce mutual and sustainable benefit.

### **Session 1: The Big Picture**

#### Paul Gudgin (Director, Edinburgh Festival Fringe)

When I was asked to give this presentation, my suggestion for a title was something along the lines of 'Marketing the Arts Gone Mad', because basically everything in the International Festival Fringe is entrepreneurial, from individual performers and performances through to my own organisation - there's virtually no safety net. It's the world's largest arts festival, and it's an open arts festival – absolutely anybody can come and perform. If you want to bring a show to Edinburgh, you need to find a venue, pay a small fee, and you're in. You take the risk along with everyone else in trying to find an audience for your show: you may end the festival by being a star and hosting your own TV series, you may end it poverty stricken, never wanting to set foot on a stage again. It's an event on a huge scale – 28,000 performances of 1900 shows in 230 venues, and last year we sold 1.5 million tickets.

From the very first festival back in 1947, self-sufficiency was really what it was all about – making of it what you can. There are important festival-wide support structures in place: a joint programme, a joint box office, etc, but in the end you're on your own in Edinburgh. This is reflected in the deal the vast majority of performers have with their venues in Edinburgh. Most of them are on a box-office split – you as a performer receive back a percentage of what you've been able to sell. This harks back to the first fringe festival, where 8 performing companies effectively gate-crashed the international festival because they hadn't been invited, but realised there would be a lot of attention, and media interest, and thought they'd turn up anyway. This spirit lives on.

So why do performers come to Edinburgh? Why do they take these risks and spend this money? They tend to come for three reasons. First is just to be part of it – to be one of 17,000 performers is an unforgettable experience. Second is to get attention. There are about 2000 journalists from all over the world that descend on Edinburgh.

It's a very unfair environment, because some will get four or five reviews, other never see a reviewer. The most important reason though is career development. There are over 1000 scouts, from TV, festivals, agencies, looking for talent.

Artists need to create a buzz round their show, to draw the journalists and scouts in. This creates a huge industry around the performers themselves. There's a large army of independent publicists and PR – some are excellent, some frankly awful. A good publicist can literally change someone's life, and can earn for themselves quite a tidy sum. This level of independent PR activity is also very beneficial to the festival as a whole. It creates a buzz and a frenzy around our event - it's as if we had a PR department of over 1000 people.

Someone once said to me that to succeed in Edinburgh, you either have to dominate, or you have to innovate, and in marketing terms, this has also created a whole industry around our festival. We have taxi cabs, bus sides, rickshaws with advertising on them – all manner of marketing gimmicks. Getting noticed really is big business in Edinburgh. There are now any number of people involved in helping artists get noticed.

So all sorts of private enterprise has built up around our events. And we have actively encouraged this. Most importantly this happens with venue managers. A venue in Edinburgh can be almost anything, from a church hall to university buildings, to the Caledonian Hotel's baggage room. They have played a fundamental role in the developing festival. We also have 20-25 market stalls, trading when we shut down the high street and fill it with street performers for 12 hours a day. We coordinate applications for this, and judge them according to type of product. We give priority to traders who sell something they've made themselves, rather than simply importing things from elsewhere. It's created an additional dimension to the event, and makes a small contribution to our income. The street performers themselves are actually just individual entrepreneurs – there are no auditions, but we do ask a bit about people's background, and they need to have public liability insurance. We supply them with a platform, they pass the hat round – they have been known to make £2000 in a day. They bring energy and interest that would be seriously missed if it wasn't there.

We have recently got into a merchandise licensing agreement with a large company, who have helped us focus on spending money on good design, and given us expert guidance. They have also helped us with marketing and distribution. This has been financially beneficial, but has also raised our game, and has provided some more opportunities for another company in Edinburgh.

There are two free newspapers devoted to the festival – *Fest* and *Three Weeks*. They rely on volunteer labour for the reviews and articles, but over the years they have adopted an increasingly professional approach to publishing and to advertising. They started off quite small and are now quite sophisticated. It would have been very easy for us as an organisation to have stifled these publications at birth – they were student led – we could have stifled them with indifference and cooperation, but we helped them out. The founders of *Fest* are now successful consultants and journalists. In the same way we have encouraged the establishment of accommodation agencies, fostering competition, but also helping them find their audience. In a nutshell, our approach is to support these small enterprises, try to create competition between them

wherever we can (try not to create monopolies), also not to seek to control them, which occasionally leads to problems, but seems to be in the spirit of entrepreneurship. Like everyone we're currently grappling with how to extract more value from our website and how to generate more enterprise around it. We have message boards for people wanting to rent accommodation etc, but we are interested in how our site can work in a MySpace/ UTube sort of way – we've been talking to them. We'd also like performers and actors to be able to use the site to promote their own career. We're engaging with any number of small online companies who might have solutions to these questions.

So is it the market gone mad? Terms like that can sound rather derogatory, as if somehow the integrity of our event is compromised by our flirtation with commerce and cultural entrepreneurs. But I really believe that their energy and ambition is an essential part of the priorities that surround the fringe. I actually think the artists and creatives have benefited enormously from it and learnt from it. This can work successfully on a smaller scale too. It's not always easy, and things can run out of control, but my advice would be to invite them in anyway.

#### Will Fulford (Camden Lock Market) - see attached powerpoint presentation

Camden Lock is a long-running and iconic market. Importantly, the coordinators prioritise application for pitches from people who make or design what they sell. There are about 80 shops, 300 stalls, offices, comedy, etc. there are over 10 million visitors a year.

Despite this success, there has been a general lack of investment in creative markets - local authorities have treated them as cash cows, and have misunderstood what markets bring to town centres. Planning policies have tended to work against what markets provide, in favour of a preoccupation with order. There is a lack of strategic focus at a policy level, despite an implicit recognition of markets' value. Perhaps a new kind of social impact assessment could complement the economic impact work championed by people like the New Economics Foundation.

Will's observational study in the US and London shows that markets are thriving – people love the atmosphere, colour, vibrancy. He is influenced by the work of William H. Whyte on behaviour in public spaces: people actually *like* crowds, diversity, and a range of social encounters. The attraction is more than the functional one of shopping, but 'heads-up' functional encounters in markets link culture and commerce, and contribute to social cohesion.

Markets have low start-up costs for businesses – you can start up a business at Camden Lock for £300. This can provide instant access to a way to make a living for immigrant communities. It's only £40 a day at the weekend to have a stall, £10-£15 during the week. There are traders of at least 100 nationalities. The high footfall creates opportunities for niche products and services that might not otherwise be viable. But the conditions for genuine diversity are fragile, and once lost, very difficult to regain.

## **Session 2: At Ground Level**

Badrul Islam (Ethnic Minority Enterprise Project and Brick Lane Festival) - see attached powerpoint presentation

Brick Lane Festival came out of a regeneration initiative in the Brick Lane area of East London, suffering as a result of the decline in the clothing industry in the vicinity. The festival began in 1996 as a half-day event, largely aimed at children. Last year the event attracted more than 70,000 people from across London and beyond. In 1997/98 it began attracting some funding from a local regeneration programme.

The development of the festival has coincided with substantial change in the area. Now the area is a thriving district for small businesses. In 2000 Brick Lane had no more than 8 or 9 Bangladeshi restaurants, whereas now there are around 60, employing directly or indirectly around 1000 people. There is not another single industry in East London that employs so many people from one community.

It has also run in parallel with the promotion and branding of 'Banglatown' as a tourism destination. This has involved visual merchandising such as a leaflet called Bangla Bites, a directory of restaurants. These initiatives have also involved training in health and safety, etc, and the festival is an integral part of this regeneration package.

The festival provides many opportunities for local business owners. Restaurateurs report that the boost in trade on festival day carries them over to the Christmas period. The curry festival is an important part of the event, but over the last three to four years the I Love Brick Lane fashion show has been developed, promoting the work of emerging designers, and the music stage in Allen Gardens champions the work of local musicians. Last year 40% of visitors came from outside East London, and 10% came from outside London or overseas, with a very mixed range of ethnic backgrounds, despite the fact that the local area is still heavily Bangladeshi, something of which we're very proud.

The biggest current problem is finance. The current event costs around £120,000. Sponsorship opportunities are limited to £50-60,000 annually. Public sector investment, since the end of the regeneration company's funding, has been very limited. This situation needs to change if the festival is to survive, and puts a great deal of pressure on the organisers in the months leading up to the event.

Mark D'Hondt and Jan Pille (Rainbow Economy project, Brussels) - see attached powerpoint presentation

Rainbow Economy brings together organisations working on social economic projects in Brussels, especially with newcomers and refugees. Although it is recognised that markets provide a relatively accessible source of livelihood for marginal groups, until recently there was a law which required market traders to have been resident for ten years in Belgium. The project has successfully campaigned to remove some of these legal barriers to newcomers wanting to establish businesses in Belgium rather than go into employment.

It has also run a number of initiatives to support would-be newcomer entrepreneurs, including those operating in the informal economy. These include business management training in accessible languages, but also several experiments with

different types of market trading models. One of these is a cooperative that circumvents legal restrictions by allowing participants to gain experience of trading at markets, but through a salary-based system.

Another experimental initiative is a specially established festival market connected with an annual arts festival, Klinkende Munt, run by the Beursschouwburg arts centre in Brussels. The market is located on the border between 'trendy' Brussels and an area with a high Moroccan population. It has an emphasis on the social interaction aspect of marketplaces, which is one of the few contexts where migrants mix with other sections of the population without feelings of fear or hostility. The festival market balances an interest in creative work with a desire to promote economic opportunities for marginal groups.

There are plans to create a regular market that provides opportunities for designers and makers (rather than importers) to sell their products, and that promotes the idea of self-employment as a viable livelihood option for unemployed people.