

A Portuguese festival with a global vision

Theatre showcase ploughs independent furrow



BY MARK BROWN

IN the coming week, Edinburgh will become the place to be for lovers of the arts. As Scotland's capital prepares to host the biggest celebration of culture on the planet, it's worth remembering that the Edinburgh International Festival and the Festival Fringe belong to a global network of arts festivals.

On continental Europe the summer arts festival season is already in full swing. France's famous Avignon Festival – which has just celebrated its 80th edition – ended last Sunday.

Meanwhile, in Portugal, the country's premier international theatre showcase – Festival de Almada – was holding its 43rd programme. I am blessed to have a relationship with this extraordinary festival that dates back 18 years.

The showcase is held in the former industrial city of Almada, on the south bank of the River Tagus, and across the water in Portugal's beautiful capital city, Lisbon.

It was founded by the great Portuguese theatre director Joaquim Benite in 1984.

I was fortunate to know Benite from 2008 until his death in 2012. A man of the left, he established his festival on accessible and egalitarian principles.

The festival has, over the years, hosted some of the biggest names in international theatre, ranging from the great German director Peter Zadek to the famous American theatremaker Robert Wilson, the acclaimed Berliner Ensemble, and amazing actors such as Charlotte Rampling and Isabelle Huppert. However, the showcase has never basked in the reflected glamour and prestige of such illustrious guests.

Most of its venues – including the fantastic “Blue Theatre”, which opened in 2005 (and was renamed in Benite's honour after he died) – are situated in working-class districts in Almada and within walking distance of each other.

The secondary school next door to the theatre houses both the festival's large outdoor auditorium and an affordable, communal, al fresco



Israel & Mohamed
Picture: Laurent Philippe

restaurant that looks, feels and tastes like a successful experiment in municipal socialism.

Only at Festival de Almada can one eat (as I have done), sitting at a row of school tables, in a mixed gathering of audience members, festival workers and artists that includes such internationally acclaimed figures as German theatre director Peter Stein and Hungarian-Serbian choreographer Josef Nadj.

The traditions introduced by Benite – including exhibitions, live music and artist talks (all free to the general public) – have been continued impressively over the last 14 years by the director's chosen successor Rodrigo Francisco.

Indeed, Francisco has kept the festival so firmly rooted in its democratic ethos that he was able to ensure that Festival de Almada was the first European theatre showcase to go ahead in July 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Festival de Almada continues to operate, under Francisco's stewardship, on the sound basis of its founding principles. When I arrived at the 2026 festival, just after the midway point, audiences had already enjoyed work by such celebrated theatremakers as Familie Flöz (from Germany), the aforementioned Stein and Nadj (both friends of the Almada showcase), and Italian artist Tom Corradini (who is bringing no fewer than five shows to the new Teatro Fisico venue during this year's Edinburgh Fringe).

My own festival itinerary included **Saudações** (“Greetings”), a piece by the Almada Theatre Company which is based upon three short,

satirical plays by the great absurdist dramatist Eugène Ionesco. With a fine Portuguese cast that includes Teresa Gafeira (a longstanding actor with the company, who also happens to be the widow of Joaquim Benite), the production has a highly stylised hyperrealism and sense of comic exaggeration of which Ionesco would, I'm sure, have approved.

I was, I must confess, less enamoured of **Le Sommet**, by famous Swiss auteur director Christoph Marthaler. This piece – in which six international hikers are stranded in a mountain shelter – seemed to me smug and humourless.

My disappointment with Herr Marthaler aside, I very much enjoyed **Israel & Mohamed**, a Spanish-French co-production about the friendship between (and paternal influences of) Andalusian Flamenco artist Israel Galván and French-Arabic theatre director Mohamed El Khatib.

Humorous, insightful and (especially in Galván's dancing) brilliantly performed, this uplifting work of cultural solidarity sits in almost surreal contrast to the ugly, xenophobic minority who are currently trying to disfigure our society.

There was tremendous humour, creativity and a bravura performance (from the immense singer and actor Ángel Ruiz) in **El Rey De La Farándula** (“The King of Show Business”). This gorgeously tongue-in-cheek, two-man cabaret (with Bru Ferri on piano and supporting vocals) takes both genuine and satirically comic inspiration from the much vaunted “Golden Age” of Spanish culture (in the 17th century).

The show is kaleidoscopic in its artistic and historical interests – from writer Calderón de la Barca to painter Velazquez, Baroque composer Monteverdi to King Philip IV of Spain and III of Portugal. This cultural overabundance is rolled into an enthralling, clever and hilarious 80 minutes of theatre.

Deservedly, Ruiz's piece won the annual audience vote (meaning that it will be invited to play at Festival de



La Mouette, top, and Bru Ferri and Ángel Ruiz in **El Rey De La Farándula**

Almada again next year). However, my favourite show in this year's showcase (which played only on the last night, making it ineligible for the audience poll) was **La Mouette** (“The Seagull”) by Théâtre-Studio from the Paris suburb of Alfortville.

By design, a number of

productions in Almada this year drew upon Chekhov's great play **The Seagull**. Directed by Christian Benedetti (who is also one of the adapters and a member of the cast), this ultra-minimalist, modern dress version of the Russian bard's opus (which plays at less than two hours)

has been in the company's repertoire for well over a decade.

It deserves that elevated status. Stripped of all pretensions and affectations, it is the most intense and affecting **Seagull** I have ever seen.

We, in Scotland, are rightly proud

of the great cultural feast Edinburgh puts on every August.

However, when work like **La Mouette** is being staged in the uniquely welcoming context of Festival de Almada, it is an important reminder that there are other ways to host an arts festival.



Edinburgh-bound Amanda Knox

Knox gives preview of Fringe show

AMANDA Knox will be performing a stand-up comedy show at Edinburgh Fringe about her wrongful imprisonment for the murder of Meredith Kercher.

In 2007, British foreign exchange student Kercher was killed in Perugia, Italy. Her American roommate Knox and her then-boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, were arrested and later convicted of murder and sexual assault in 2009.

The couple maintained their innocence and, after years of legal battles, were acquitted of sexual assault and murder by Italy's highest court in 2015.

Just over a decade on, Knox is now set to share her story on stage.

Now 39, she is married with two children and lives on Vashon-Maury Island in rural Washington.

Knox said she initially planned to make a show about motherhood – but was told by comedian friends she had to “address the elephant in the room”.

Her comedy show's title **Cartwheel** references a story that once claimed she did cartwheels in the police station after her friend's death.

Speaking to *The Telegraph*, Knox said she did not believe there were any topics off bounds for comedy, but insisted she would not poke fun at Kercher's death.

“I don't joke about Meredith's death. I joke a lot about how I was vilified, but I don't joke about her murder. That's just a line for me. I set red lines for myself that other comedians don't. I've had other comedians pitch me jokes that I just would not do,” she said.

Asked about whether her loved ones were concerned about backlash to the show, she referred to a gag she says on stage: “My friends and family are actually really nervous for me, despite my spotless record in the court of public opinion.”

However, *The Telegraph* has reported that Kercher's relatives, according to their lawyer Francesco Maresca, have called the idea of the show “offensive and deplorable”.

Knox said that she believed Kercher would “appreciate the show because it grapples with what it means to be a young woman, and it is honest”.

Rudy Hermann Guede was convicted of Kercher's murder in 2008. He was released from prison in 2021 after serving 13 years of a 16-year term.