70 years of the Edinburgh Festival

What 70 years of the Edinburgh Festival has done for the arts – and the economy

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Sir Rudolph Bing, co-founder and first director of the Edinburgh International Festival, once said: “The opera always loses money. That’s as it should be. Opera has no business making money.” Clearly this didn’t hinder his career, as he went on to be manager of New York’s Metropolitan Opera for 22 years.

It was a throwaway comment, perhaps, though Bing was noted less for flippancy than an abiding commitment to the high arts and music in particular. It’s hard to know what he would make of today’s cornucopia of Edinburgh festivals, with an artistic and financial range expanded so far beyond the scope of the original that it prompted one audience member to say:

> *The Edinburgh Festival obliterates the city: there isn’t a town called Edinburgh any more, there’s a town called the Edinburgh Festival. And you can’t escape it.*

That’s perhaps overstating the case – there are geographical and demographic parts of Edinburgh beyond the core of the Festival – but only slightly. There’s no doubting its

centrality to both the city's profile and its economy.

Indeed, Edinburgh has become synonymous with its festivals in the 70 years since the International Festival was launched by Bing. And although much of the stand-up comedy and commercial content would probably be anathema to him, it's also the case that while its festivals have shaped Edinburgh, it was the city's features that drew them there in the first place.

The Standard Life Opening Event : Bloom to mark the first weekend of Edinburgh International Festival

Post-war progress

It's possible to view the growth of the Edinburgh International and Fringe Festivals through the prism of post-war historical and political progress. Rudolph Bing himself arrived in Britain having fled Nazi Germany in 1934. The first Edinburgh Festival was explicitly conceived of as an attempt to bring people together after the Second World War, but in the knowledge that many of Europe's major cities were too devastated by the fighting to be able to host such an event.

Bing looked at other cities, including Oxford, but arrived at Edinburgh on the grounds that it not only had the scale to be able to support such an undertaking, but had also maintained its pre-war elegance, being relatively unscathed by the extensive bombing that had shattered many other major cities.

In this respect, there are historical parallels with the use of the arts as a part of the process of social recovery after the war. The Arts Council of Great Britain, forerunner of the modern Arts Councils, emerged from the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, which had itself been set up in 1939 to boost morale and provide employment to artists during the war.

Gaining its first Royal Charter in 1946, the Arts Council of Great Britain was inspired by a continuing desire to uplift society, and also to sustain art forms that had suffered or been co-opted by totalitarian propaganda during the war years, such as with the fascists' use of Beethoven, Wagner and others.

It initially operated under the auspices of John Maynard Keynes, the economist whose ideas helped to shape much government policy from the 1940s to the 1970s, and can be seen as a part of the post-war political consensus. Indeed, Bing co-founded the Festival with Harry Harvey Wood, chair of the British Council, set up prior to the war to use British culture to promote cooperation and education.

High and popular culture

The emphasis on culture at this point was very much on the "high" arts, yet from its inception, the festival has been a focal point for debates about culture and who, precisely, it is for.

The Fringe emerged at the same time as the International Festival when theatre companies that hadn't been invited to the official festival turned up regardless and occupied alternative venues. Also feeding into fringe activities was the Edinburgh Peoples' Festival, launched by poet Hamish Henderson in 1951 with backing from the Labour Party, Communist Party and Edinburgh Trades Union Council.

This was a reaction against the perceived elitism of the International Festival where the emphasis on opera and high art was seen as excluding both working people and, crucially, the local culture of the city in which it was based.

While this sought to place traditional, and Scottish, arts at the centre of the festival experience, the broader range of the Fringe as it has grown alongside the International

Festival has seen the inclusion of experimental and, notably, commercial culture. From Beyond the Fringe in 1960, featuring Jonathan Miller, Alan Bennett, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, the Fringe has been closely aligned with the forefront of popular comedy, as evidenced by the extensive sponsorship of comedy awards associated with it.

In spite of the struggles that most shows and many venues encounter in turning a profit, there's no question about the economic scale of both the International and Fringe Festivals, counter to – somewhat ironically – the core values of both Bing and the members of the Labour movement behind the Peoples' Festival.

The International and Fringe Festivals have given rise to a year-round calendar of events that in 2015 was worth £280m to the city's economy and £313m nationally.
Indeed, the festivals are now so important to Edinburgh's identity and economy that they have become part of a broader discussion about how to manage the cultural provision for the city as a whole, and outside of the festival period. Concerns have been raised, with one promoter stating:

> *The support mechanisms required to support grassroots and small-scale cultural activity in Edinburgh outside the Festival and Hogmanay [the New Year celebration in Scotland] periods are simply not there.*

Debates about how to manage city life, and the relationship between the Edinburgh Festivals and the rest of the city are unlikely to go away. Likewise, the question of whether the arts should be valued for rarefied excellence, as per Bing's perspective, or their social inclusion, as Henderson believed, will long be with us.

But regardless of whether we view culture as an intrinsic good in itself or for the instrumental benefits it brings, there's no question that they are increasingly an economic driver at

local and national levels.

And for Edinburgh, while the festivals may have diverged considerably from Rudolph Bing's initial artistic vision, the core notion of bringing people together to celebrate the arts, however the word is defined, has put Scotland's capital on the map.

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