

A conversation with Amanda Tyndall – Edinburgh International Science Festival Director

Amanda Tyndall is the Festival and Creative Director of the Edinburgh International Science Festival. She told us: “My role is to oversee all programming and creative work not just for the Festival each April, but for all the areas of business that we get involved in like our education programme and our international work.



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Science festival 2018 launch

Amanda Tyndall, Festival and Creative Director

“By way of background I did do a science degree. I have a degree in pharmacology and neuroscience. I discovered pretty early on however that I was a terrible scientist. In the space of twelve months I set fire to a wall, flooded a basement and stabbed my self in the hand with a really dangerous drug

“So I decided that as a service to myself and humanity I would stop *doing* science, and move into communicating science!”

So is this the perfect job for you?

“Yes it is I think. I wanted to keep on doing what I loved involved in the excitement and curiosity that is inherent in science, but leaving somebody else to do the practical bits. So I started out as a science writer and editor to begin with. Over a period of time I tried my hand at various things. I went back to university and studied for a Masters in the Communication of Science so I have that degree from Imperial College.”

Originally from Liverpool she was born and brought up in the north west she went to Leeds to university then lived in London and Brighton and went out to Australia for several years.

She explained how she decided to go to Australia : “At one point when living in London and the south east, I was working for the Royal Institution of Great Britain which is a science organisation based in Mayfair launched in about 1796. It is perhaps best known as the home of the Christmas Lectures, the annual televised lectures between Christmas and New Year.

“I worked on the general public programme but I went to Australia to set up the first international branch. I spent six years in Adelaide setting up the Science Exchange.

“In Adelaide I started to do a lot of work linking science with the arts and creative industries in part through their festivals. And then when a job opportunity came up closer to home in the northern hemisphere with the Science Festival it seemed a good leap to make about seven years ago

“I arrived just as one Festival was being delivered and in time to get involved with the programming for the next year. This is a great city. I stayed in Leith but quite recently

moved out to East Lothian where I was trapped up a hill in the recent snow!”



2018 Science Festival Launch Calton Hill, Edinburgh

Photo : John Preece

With science in your background what is your overarching purpose in your role with the festival?

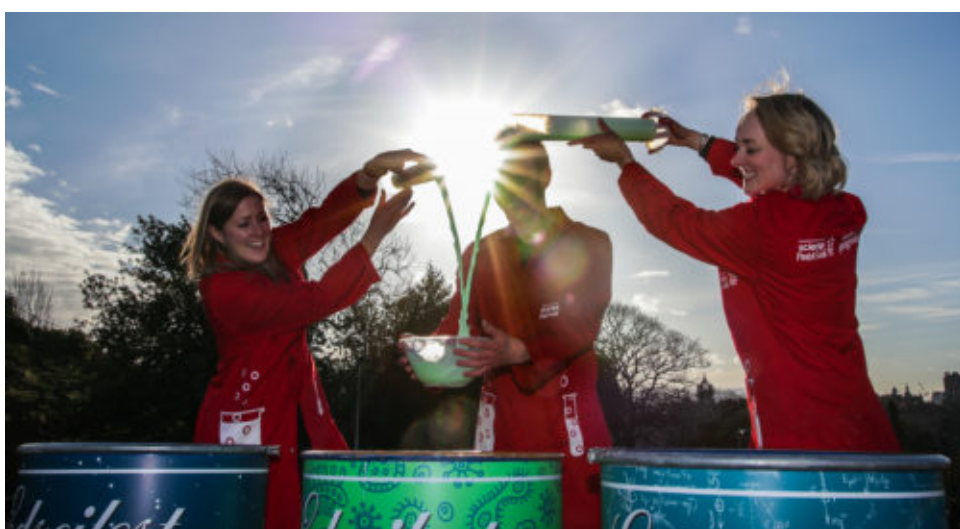
“One of the most interesting questions I asked myself was how was I going to improve and change a Festival that has been around for about a quarter of a century at that stage. It has such a strong reputation for what it does.

“In particular for youth and families I guess the answer to that was to maintain the excellence for youth and families, but to really see what I could do to shake up the rest of the programme. So by concentrating on teen and adult audiences I want to really bring science to all. I want to try and break down the stigma of science, the fear factor that many people

have around the idea that science isn't for them.

"I think a lot of people are put off science at some point through their journey through school, in part because of the very vocational nature that a lot of science teaching has taken. I was trained up to be a lab technician and discovered very quickly that I was a terrible lab technician.

"A lot of science is very practical. Sure, there are people who work in the more theoretical side of things who don't have to be a technician, but yes a lot of it is very technical."



2018 Science Festival Launch Calton Hill, Edinburgh

Photo : John Preece

How do you then translate that overarching ambition into each year's programme?

This year's Edinburgh International Science Festival has the theme 'Life, the Universe and everything else you can think of' – celebrating the wonder and diversity of life and asks what it means to be 'alive' in the 21st century. Amanda explained : "We pick a broad theme to base a coherent programme around. We really don't want it to be too restrictive, so we would never pick Chemistry or Physics or something very niche.

"The theme this year responds to the fact that we are 30 this

year, a big milestone for us. It is also the Scottish Year of Young People. We are really interested through all of our activities in highlighting the centrality of science to people's everyday lives, the role that science and technology has to play in helping to secure successful and sustainable futures for us as individuals, societies and a planet.

"The idea of celebrating the wonder and diversity of life and the role that the young people of Scotland have to play in helping our future be a successful one, seemed to be very pertinent."

So how do you pull the programme together around that central theme?

"Well it is not just me of course. The Science Festival team in total is about 35 strong, but that covers not just the work on the April festival, but the six month education programme and all the international business.

"In terms of the creative team we have a team of seven who work on all of the content development. They do a combination of creation of content internally which is something that sets us apart from many science festivals. There is also the curation of third party content, so we are working with a wide range of partners and individuals."



Amanda launching the 2018 programme at Summerhall

How is this Festival funded? Is it by way of one-off grants or is it more sustainable by now?

“It is a real combination actually. We receive money from a range of principal statutory funders, from The Scottish Government and The City of Edinburgh Council in particular. After that there is a range of grants, philanthropy and support. But about half of our programme is ticketed, and ticket revenue is an important contribution to that.

“We play a juggling act every year where we make sure that a really good proportion of our content is free and accessible to all. We remove the price barrier for some people but we are not afraid to charge for other events as it gives us an extra level of sustainability, which is important just in case any funding crumbles away.”

The festival is also active internationally. “As the world’s first science festival Edinburgh is well respected by our peers. Each year we receive visitors from around the world who come to see us in action.

“About six years ago I think we received a delegation from the

government of Abu Dhabi who wanted to create their own version of the Edinburgh festival. So we have now worked with them for six years.”

This does not mean that Amanda gets to enjoy the international travel however! She said : “My job is to be Cinderella – to stay home and look after Edinburgh! My team work on the content for the international business while I stay here and make sure that the mothership continues to be a great success.

“The international business has been wonderful for us. It has enabled us to create new content and invest back into the company, to look at opportunities of sharing content too. The Science festival is an independent not for profit educational charity but they also have a commercial arm, the Ventures side of the business which delivers the international work. This protects our original body from risk too.”

The job Amanda has is quite wide-ranging. She is the boss of a 30 plus strong team.

“The only typical thing in a science festival day is the lack of a typical day! It is never boring! A large portion of my role as Creative Director is to set the vision, theme and the topics. I do some of that on my own and then I work with my brilliant team who then work with a wide range of partners.

“Then the rest of my job is as part of the senior management team is to ensure the profitability, sustainability and success of the festival. So it is all about working with all of the department heads to ensure that not just the content but the messaging that we are putting out about it will sell the tickets!

“We have a fundraising team and we work closely with them to make sure that money keeps coming in and that we keep our sponsors happy.”

One of the things that people may miss about the Science

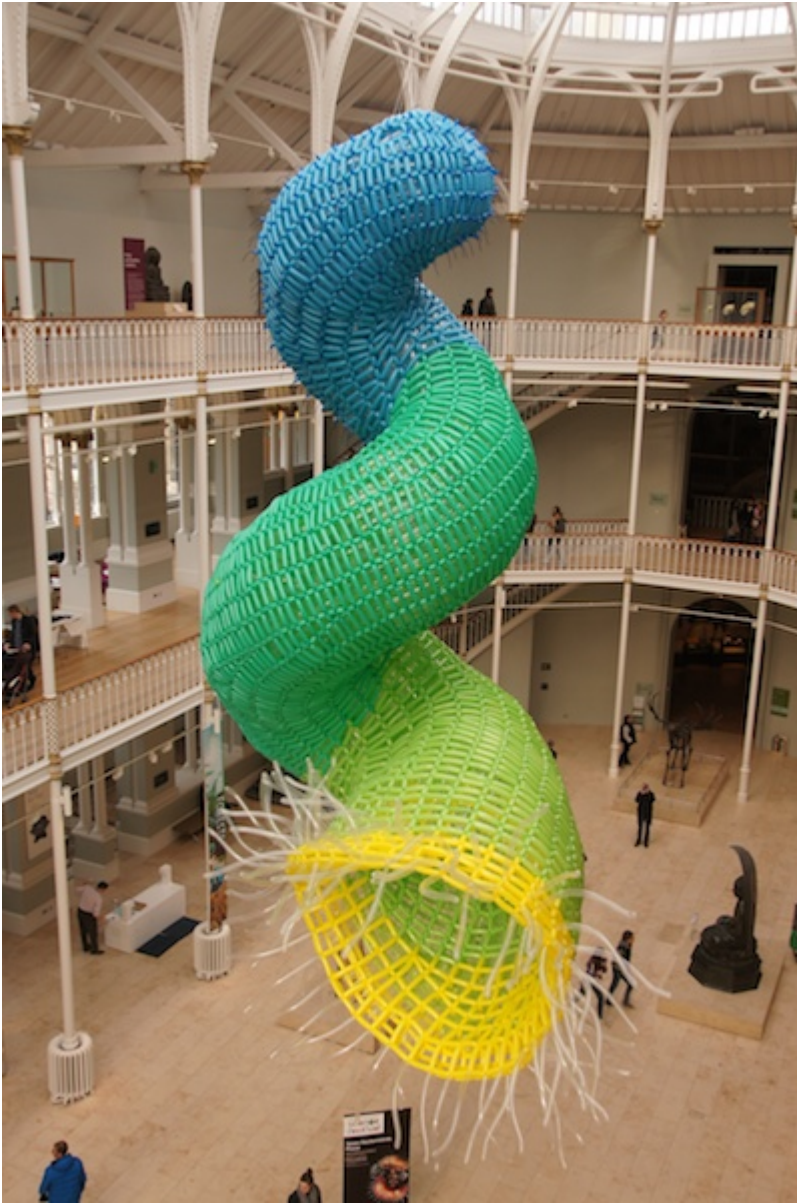
Festival is that it also has an adult theme. Amanda said that one of her biggest challenges is to explain that the festival is not just for children. She said : “I know from my own circle of friends and family that this is the common misconception. So the strength of reputation that the festival has for families is a double-edged sword. It is really important that people get to know that the programme may appeal to those who just don’t think they are interested in it. We need them to pick up a programme and come and give us a chance! ”

So we have been doing Science by stealth programming! For example we run Gastrofest a series of events on the science of food and drink which is aimed at people who want a night out but with a topic which interests them. And what do you know – there is science at the heart of it!

“If you stop 100 people on the street and ask them if they are interested in science most of them will say no. We have a problem with the word science – although they may say they are interested in the environment for example.”

Something new this year that Amanda thinks a Science Festival novice might pick is to go to the National Museum of Scotland on Chambers Street, walk into the Grand Gallery and look up to be wowed by the spectacle of about 45,000 balloons constructed into a giant sculpture named Event Horizon.

This was done in 2013 by the same artist – but this year it will be even bigger than before!



She explained : “This will be built in situ during the first few days of the Science Festival by a US based artist Jason Hackenworth and will form a jaw-dropping centrepiece. Alongside that there is an exhibition which asks about where humans have come from and where we are going.”

To wind down from the festival Amanda has acquired a new puppy, reads a lot of science and science fiction. She said : “I am an unashamed science geek. There is a blurry line between my work and home life. I really am interested in science. I like to get out and about in the fresh air.

“I feel lucky. I realise that I can still be involved in science in one of the most interesting and exciting areas of

culture. Scratch the surface – science is at the heart of everything.”

“We actively promote the value of women in STEM jobs and careers. Science suffers from degrees of discrimination but we keep chipping away. We have a largely female workforce here.

“About 15 % of our speakers were female at the beginning of my tenure here, but now it is about 40%.” And it’s clear that Amanda sees that only as a step in the right direction.

[Booking for Science Festival events here.](#)



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