

Letter from Scotland

The story of a desperate man in search for himself in a mad world is roughly the plot of Peter Gynt, the play at the centre of this year's Edinburgh Festival. It's a re-working of Ibsen's original play of 1867 and Greig's wonderful opera.

This time, David Hare and the National Theatre of Britain have set the story not in Norway but here in Scotland. It stars the Glasgow actor James McArdle who plays a Scottish soldier with an overwhelming ambition for self-fulfilment. He steals a wife from a wedding and goes on a rampage through the world, real and imagined, meeting trolls and sphinxes, until he returns home to repent and die.

It's a satire on the state of the world today and Western man's over-emphasis on the self. Peter Gynt tries many personas, from buccaneering capitalist to false prophet, but realises at the end that he is just a man. Do you recognise anyone here ? Our new prime minister perhaps ?

This is just one of the 30 shows in the official festival. There are over 3,000 shows in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and there are 12 festivals...the book festival, the film festival, the jazz festival, the TV festival, the military Tattoo to name but a few, most of them going on this month. All together last year there were 4.5 million "attendances." And it's big business. The most recent measure put the economic boost to Edinburgh at £280m and 5,600 jobs.

Have these festivals become too big for their own good ? This

is the question that is now haunting the city high heid yins. There are suggestions about spreading the festivals out across the summer or across the city. There are debates too over “managing” the sheer volume of visitors. The population of the city virtually doubles during August. Maybe we should limit the number of new hotels being built, or set controls on Airbnb, or introduce a tourist tax.



Prime Minister Boris Johnson on his first visit to Edinburgh at Bute House being met by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon
Maybe we need a "Boris factor"

to bounce us through all our problems. The prime minister breezed through Scotland on Monday as part of his first tour of the four nations that make up this rather dis-united kingdom. It was a curiously quiet affair, perhaps reflecting the exhaustion a lot of people are feeling with the whole Brexit business. I sense a resignation that “something” had to be done to break the deadlock and Boris might as well be that something.

I’m glad to see that Nicola Sturgeon has not succumbed to that defeatist feeling. “Behind all the bluff and bluster, this is a dangerous government, for Scotland and the whole of the UK,” she said after meeting Boris in Bute House. And she challenged him to a public debate on independence.

In a signal that he is taking his role as “minister for the Union” seriously, Boris prowled about a nuclear submarine at the Faslane navy base on the Clyde. And he went out of his way to say there will be no re-run of the referendum on Scottish independence on his watch.



The greatest show on Earth begins.
The only other encounter of
his visit was to meet “remainer” Ruth Davidson, leader of the
Scottish
Conservatives. Oh, to discover what was
said at that meeting ! The question
hanging in the air is: will she instruct her 13 MPs at
Westminster to vote
against a no-deal Brexit ?

We had another celebrity
visitor this week. Prince Charles came to “open” the world’s
fourth-largest
windfarm, the Beatrice, eight miles off the north east coast,
at Wick. Its 84 turbines can power nearly half a
million homes. It cost £2.5billion to
build and is a joint venture between the Scottish-based energy
firm SSE and a

Canadian oil company Talisman. May they make lots of money out of it and in the process save the planet.

But to return to the festivals, this year's military Tattoo pays an unlikely tribute to one of the greatest showmen of all time, Freddie Mercury and his band Queen. So, mixed in with the 250 strong pipes and drums, the Scottish dancing, the Chinese choir and the French Can-can performers, Sergeant David Fiu from the New Zealand Army Band will sing Queen's great anthem "The Show Must Go On." And for the next three weeks, it will.