

Demarco's Edinburgh – book launch

With the Fringe and Festival in full swing in the city centre, it was perhaps symbolic that Richard Demarco's book launch took place on the very edge of the city, at the Boardwalk Beach Club in Silverknowes. Demarco has long had something of an outsider status within the Scottish cultural firmament.

On a warm, muggy evening, the place was alive with a large throng of Demarco's friends, associates and collaborators – all entertained by live music and a talk by the legend himself who, at 93, is still burning with passion for culture. Those in attendance included one the co-founders of the Traverse Theatre Terry Lane and the broadcasters Sheena McDonald and Allan Little.

The book, [*Demarco's Edinburgh*](#) (Luath Press) co-written with the veteran author and journalist Roddy Martine, looks back on the many Edinburgh Festivals the two men have experienced and been closely involved in. Demarco has, possibly uniquely, attended every single Festival going back to 1947 which he attended as a 17 year-old pupil of Holy Cross Academy.

In his opening remarks Martine jokingly suggested that the

location was appropriate, given that Demarco's Roman forebears had a substantial 'encampment' a short distance along the coast at Cramond! Martine recalled first meeting Demarco at his gallery on Melville Crescent and that Demarco has been "opening doors all my life – for me and for many others" ever since. Demarco has, Martine believes, "enormously enriched" the cultural life of the city and the Festival. Martine admitted it had been "a challenge" to put the book together. The main work had only started in late March so getting it out in time for the Festival required a lot of effort. He praised Gavin MacDougall and his team at [Luath Press](#), who had done a fantastic job in getting it to press.

Martine urged readers of the book to examine the timeline at the rear of the book, which illustrates the extraordinary range of people that Demarco has worked with – and the extraordinary times through which he has lived. This and other parts of the book make use of diaries Demarco has kept throughout his life. He is always sketching, writing and taking photographs (even when he is being photographed himself!). This habit for recording forms the basis of his vast archive (or 'gesamtkunstwerk' as he prefers to call it), much of which is [currently at Summerhall](#) and will hopefully find a purpose built setting as part of the Art Works in Granton.



Roddy Martine left and Richard Demarco, CBE
Demarco began his typically rich and meandering narrative by focusing on what stood in front of him, through the windows of the café; the Firth of Forth. For Demarco, art and nature are inextricably linked – as manifested in the work of two of his long-time collaborators [Joseph Beuys](#) and Ian Hamilton Finlay. Demarco used the Forth as a visual metaphor for the flow of creativity and ideas across nations. It had brought tidal forces which had changed Edinburgh and his life.

In the tidal shifts he also saw a constant reminder of grave threats, especially ‘the perils of global warming’, the possible ‘collapse of democracy in the USA’, and something he hoped never to see again; war in Europe. The war in Ukraine is, Demarco believes, ‘a threat to the very idea of Europe’; the idea that the Festival is ‘a glorious manifestation’ of.



After the horrors of war, it had brought people together 'through the universal language of art', not the 'divisive' language of politics. Art is the language with which you can communicate with anyone. As he put it, 'every child I taught' [at Scotus Academy in Corstorphine] could use the language of art'. He urged everyone to embrace creativity and not be 'numpties' or cultural tourists who didn't really engage.

In emphasising the European connections, Demarco reaffirmed his deep scepticism about a focus on specifically Scottish art. He poked fun at the idea of Scottish art as inherently superior. This parochialism was a dead end which overlooked Scotland's true identity. Scotland had been the Northern frontier of the Roman Empire and it had been deeply connected to continental Europe ever since. Demarco feels profoundly European and hence finds Brexit and the narrow thinking behind it deplorable. This is all connected to Demarco's sense of being an outsider, due to his Italian heritage and further emphasised by his Roman Catholic schooling. Being treated as an outsider has shaped him.



In reflecting on his early years, he compared Martine's school, the Edinburgh Academy, with his own – Holy Cross Academy. While the Academy was clearly the top school at that time, Holy Cross was seen as a slightly 'dodgy place', with Catholics often treated as second class citizens. Looking back on those early days he described the Edinburgh of the late 1940s as a rather narrow-minded and 'sad place'. It was only the 'miracle' of the Edinburgh Festival that brought it out of the doldrums. Every year Demarco felt a sadness as the 'circus' left town, leaving him feeling culturally bereft.

In describing the glories of the Festival and Fringe, Demarco tends to use the past tense. He admitted that the Demarco's Edinburgh could be seen as a *cri de coeur* for the Festival. He sees the contemporary Festival and Fringe as a pale imitation, and bemoaned the relegation of the visual arts within it. Instead, stand-up comedy had become the dominant aspect of the Fringe. Demarco sees this as tied up with the Fringe's transition from a culturally ambitious event to 'a money making machine'. He feels that the Festival still 'hasn't yet

taken root' in the city, as Edinburgh has remained fundamentally 'resistant to culture' and its claims to be a capital culture were rather unconvincing. Glasgow for instance has a greater claim to be a cultural city, in Demarco's view. Edinburgh 'hadn't really deserved' the Festival in the first place and then only managed to do so as the most obvious candidates (Salzburg, Vienna, Berlin) were not viable at that time.

There was a pessimistic tone as he reflected that this could be his final Festival. Therefore he was keen to see the book published as a testament to his life-long involvement with the Festival and thanked Roddy Martine for 'performing a miracle' to get it together so quickly. He saw the book as an opportunity to put on record that all he had achieved had only been possible with the support of his friends and collaborators. He also singled out his wife Anne for all her support ('I would have been very alone without her').

Demarco ended on a particularly powerful note, reemphasising what lay behind his internationalism. He related that [Rico](#), the recent film on his life (by Marco Federici) was so titled as this was the name he was referred to at home as a child. However, since his childhood he'd had to camouflage this 'shameful name' and instead go by Richard or Ricky. He reminded the audience that the recently departed singer Tony Bennett's real name was Anthony Dominick Benedetto. Italians in the UK and the states had suffered greatly during WWII.

So, Demarco brought his talk to an end by reemphasising art's ability to connect rather than divide. He strongly recommended that everyone present went to see [Vanya is Alive by Natalia Lizorkina](#), now receiving its UK premiere at the Edinburgh Fringe. The play is presented by a group of artists currently in exile due to their anti-war stance. Demarco made clear that it is the Russian regime we should oppose, not Russians. Russia has long been a culturally vital place. It reminded him that 'art is a matter of life and death' and also that there

were fragments of quality still being presented in the Festival and Fringe. He wishes the new Festival Director [Nicola Benedetti](#), another Scot with Italian heritage, all the best in her first year.

Demarco's hope is that performances such as *Vanya is Alive* can inspire a better, more ambitious Festival; one truly worthy of the original mission. This is the vision found in the pages of *Demarco's Edinburgh*.

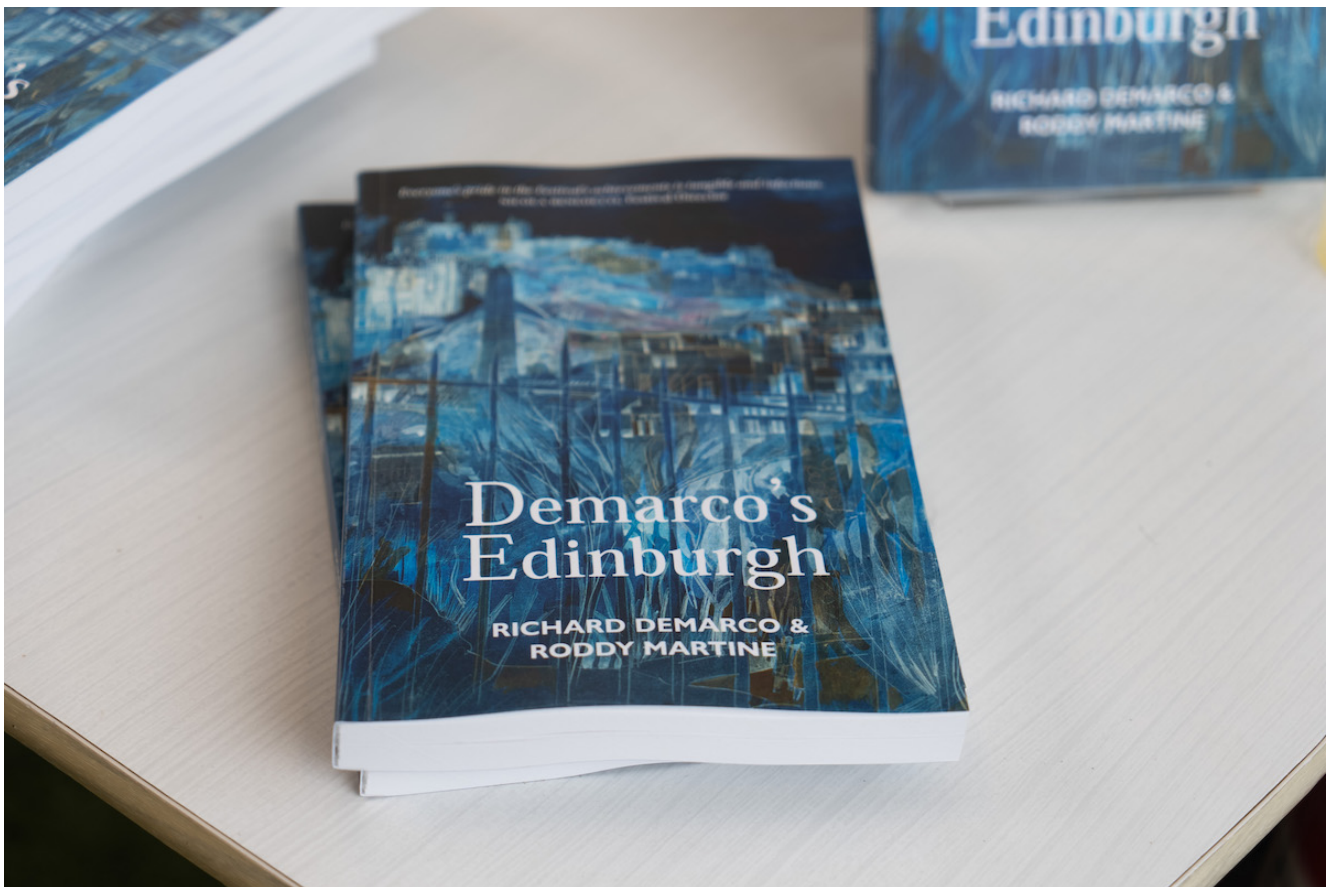
[Demarco's Edinburgh \(Luath Press\) is out now.](#)

(Editor's note – Dr Charlie Ellis has contributed a whole chapter to the book.)





Roddy Martine introduces Ricky Demarco





At the launch of Demarco's Edinburgh

