

Edinburgh Comedy Awards are a serious business

Fringe ticket sales are off to a good start according to Nica Burns, CBE, who produces the Edinburgh Comedy Awards.

At the awards lunch on Sunday she commented that the atmosphere in the capital is “buzzy” and that everyone feels “uplifted in the city”.

Whether or not the change in the political landscape in the UK will have any effect on arts and arts funding is, in her view, “a bit early to say”. But she acknowledges as an arts professional “there are a lot of pressures on the government’s budget”, and that no matter how sympathetic they might be whether they can find any “additional hard cash” is another matter.

She also commented that philanthropy (such as her own) is “absolutely critical going forward”. She said: “We are certainly going to have to look further, and work harder to get more, because without philanthropy, how can we continue to push our art forms?”

That positive feeling which Ms Burns mentioned in her speech at the lunch certainly chimes with the producers of the bigger Fringe venues who were in attendance. All have staged their preview shows for the press by now, with around 100 shows involved in the various launches in the past few days, appearing on stage for around seven minutes each in showcases to the press. None of the bosses of Assembly, Gilded Balloon

or Pleasance uttered one gripe about short term lets, the increased cost of staging a show in Edinburgh, or any of the complaints made in past years. Instead each one appeared happy that their venue has a huge variety of Fringe performers happily in situ in Edinburgh, and raring to go.

Ms Burns said: "Nothing makes people happier than great ticket sales. And we've got another three weeks of sales to come! Maybe we'll even have a record year.

"Comedy is now a whopping 39% of the Fringe programme – which is extraordinary. It wasn't like this 20 years ago, theatre always led the way, but in this century, comedy is king."

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is also more than just comedy, but it is true that some big names have got their foot on the ladder here – particularly after winning the Edinburgh Comedy Awards, previously known as the Perrier or Dave Awards.

Speaking to The Edinburgh Reporter, Ms Burns explained that the two principal prizes at the awards amount to £10,000 and £5,000 each and that the awards themselves are important to the performers. She said: "I think the point about Comedy Awards is twofold. One is they deserve to have an award, they're a serious genre. And, as I have said, they are 39% of the Fringe now. But comedy is very hard to do, and the people who do it have to both write material as well as performing it, and you have to bring a lot of skills together.

"It has really helped running the awards and having respected journalists on the panel and respected commentators to start a serious conversation about not just the fact that comedy is satisfying as an audience member but it's a serious skill. Real talent is a huge achievement if you can really do it. And we are now a major force worldwide in comedy. We Brits, we have a great sense of humour."

She reminisced about one particular year when the shortlist included Frank Skinner, Eddie Izzard, Jack Dee, saying: "We

have had years like that when every single person who is nominated has gone on to be household names or completely different.” Alumni of the awards are many, but names include Emma Thompson, Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie, Tony Slattery and Harry Hill.

This is Nica Burns’ baby and it is 40 years this year since she began running the event. She is otherwise a theatre producer and owner, and lives in London. Last year the awards almost came to grief due to lack of funding, but is back on an even keel now, partly thanks to her own backing, and that of Donald Taffner who supports Best Newcomer and Best Comedy Show in honour of his late parents, Don and Eleanor Taffner. The Victoria Wood Foundation sponsors the spirit of the Fringe panel prize in honour of the late comedy genius.

The panel under the chairmanship of Nana Hughes, Head of Scripted Comedy at ITV, is made up of ten judges – three of whom are members of the public and must pass a difficult test on their knowledge of comedy. Each of these three will go and see between 60 and 80 shows while they are here in Edinburgh.

This year, a total of 563 comedy shows are eligible for the Awards. The Shortlist will be announced on Wednesday 21 August 2024, the Nominees’ photo-call will be on Thursday 22 August 2024. The 42nd Edinburgh Comedy Awards ceremony will take place on Saturday 24 August 2024.



04/08/2024

Nica Burns, CBE, and Donald Taffner of DLT Entertainment at the Edinburgh Comedy Awards Lunch

Pic Greg Macvean