

# Rare joy in such a soulless festival

**P**ROFESSOR George Steiner came in for a great deal of stick at the start of Edinburgh's annual arts jamboree. He dared to suggest in his opening lecture that after 50 years, the world's oldest and largest festival should think about re-inventing itself.

Truth to tell, as golden jubilees go, this year's festival could hardly be judged as glistening. There is an air of stagnation and self-satisfaction that is distinctly unhealthy.

As for drama, the programme devised by Brian MacMaster hardly smacks of exciting innovation, which should be the watchword — indeed the very reason — for any festival worthy of the name.

True, the works of Robert LePage, Robert Wilson, Mark Morris and Peter Stein are never less than interesting. But they have become almost as permanent a fixture of the Edinburgh scene as the grandiose monument to Sir Walter Scott. Discouragingly, it was the much

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publicised and disgraceful non-appearance of M. LePage's one-man homage to Hamlet — 'for technical reasons' — that proved the most newsworthy event of the entire collection so far.

The Fringe, too, seems to have lost the plot somewhat. It can be argued that it is so slickly organised that the chances of sitting through total dross for a couple of hours — as one frequently did in the more freewheeling days of yore — are mercifully reduced.

Each of the main Fringe venues — the Assembly Rooms, the Pleasance, the Gilded Balloon and the ever redoubtable Traverse — scrupulously vet the productions to which they lease out their space, expertise and publicity machines. Stay within their orbit and you are pretty safe.

Slava Polunin's utterly breathtaking SNOWSHOW, the magic is the kind we used to know as children. Slava is a clown in the age-old tradition of Grock, with a Chaplinesque love for the little man. He has his capacity audiences in the palm of his imagination from the moment he appears. And his stage effects are dazzling.

Dolorous yet sharp-witted, slow and remote yet balletically fragile, his charm wraps itself around us like a warm comfort blanket — literally at one point.

For he envelops his entire, vast and dotting audience in a gauze-like substance which stretches endlessly across our upraised hands like some giant cobweb and then disappears as instantly and mysteriously as the morning dew. As a finale, he deluges everyone with a gentle snowstorm. The entire auditorium is transformed into a winter wonderland. Suddenly they are young, innocent and transported with delight.



Clowning around: The magic of Snowshow

PICTURE BY  
TRISTRAM KENTON