



The Festival Experience

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EARLY IN MY PROFESSIONAL CAREER, long before I ever attended a book festival, I was encouraged by a publisher to start performing in schools in order to build my profile with my potential audience. I was given no particular advice as to how to go about this. I knew I would be largely speaking (alongside my brother and co-creator Lorenzo) to children aged 7–11, but I didn't know any teachers or any other authors who presented work to a similar audience. As creators of funny books, we decided to rehearse a proper show that felt like an extension of our work; a sort of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* for children. It was pretty daft.

Fortunately, performance had been a part of my earlier creative life; first, when I studied drama at college, and later when I pursued a career in music. That said, I've never felt at ease in the wings. No, let me rephrase. I have always felt, and continue to feel, physically sick before appearing at any and every show. My brother, who I've created books with for years, has never had a single wobble prior to performing (or none that I've visibly detected) but I've always found myself frozen to the spot and my heart pounding.

As it happened, those nerves translated into raw energy, and I quickly found that playing to halls full of excitable children, and getting a laugh from them, was unimaginably rewarding. I don't just mean financially – although the school circuit has been a supplementary income stream – but the experience was good for the soul. Working alone at a desk, I'd never been that aware of the effect that my work could have on others.



Soon we discovered that we'd built a show that was attractive to *other* venues, despite the fact that our books were yet to gain any real recognition. Much like appearing at schools, book festivals (about which, we knew nothing) proved to be another great space to both meet our audience and find a new one. I've seen this for myself, having performed at all the major festivals in the UK multiple times. If more than five percent of any crowd had met me before, I'd be *amazed* and that size of audience is brilliant for attracting new eyes to your work.

Appearing at festivals opened doors my brother and I never knew existed. The better versed we became at performing, the more opportunities we were offered. From appearing at an outside festival in Singapore, to performing before 1,400 at the ASB Theatre in Auckland, to headlining last year's Scottish Friendly Book Trust Jamboree at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall before 2,000 children, our festival journey has been a remarkable one.

I really should feel differently by now and yet those nervous inflexible limbs and that pounding heart don't appear to be going anywhere. And you know what? That's okay. Sixty seconds after I step onstage I'm reminded of why festivals are so dear to my heart. They present me with the chance to bring the spirit of our books to life. Our shows remain daft, but they've helped me to fall in love with the experience of performing all over again.