



The Festival Experience

Stuart Walton

I HAVE ONLY EVER DONE TWO festivals, but they were two of the biggies. In 2001, my publisher flew my beloved and me to Edinburgh for the Book Festival. It was an altogether rewarding experience, not least in that there was a small payment. My event was scheduled for 7.30 on a Saturday evening, and was reasonably well attended and generously received. I gave a bespoke talk, rather than a reading, on the theme of my book – the history of intoxication – and was then interviewed before taking a series of reflective and constructive interventions from the audience.

Immediately afterwards, I sat at a table and signed copies for a modest queue of buyers — eleven, to be precise. Not even the queue stretching around three sides of the square for Jacqueline Wilson's signing dented *my* sense of achievement. Then the publisher took us to dinner in the redeveloped port district of Leith. I thought I'd arrived.

The following year, to mark the publication of the paperback edition, I did Hay-on-Wye. Nobody felt that a mere paperback edition quite merited a solo spot, and so I was bundled into a double-act with the late Howard Marks, the international drug trafficker turned memoirist who had read my book in manuscript and given me a cover endorsement for it. It's fair to say the preparations for our show were not exactly rigorous. In fact, the performance amounted to Mr Marks giving his usual drinking and spliffing stage turn, interspersed with me reading successive passages.

A fair amount of wine was consumed before we had even got to the venue,



and just before we ambled over, my co-speaker bundled me into a public Portaloo and regaled me with a dose of something both highly refined and highly illegal. As we took to a stage only recently vacated by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, the stimulant punched me brutally in the diaphragm. At the third of my six breathless extract readings, the page-markers in the book showered out, leaving me to leaf resourcefully through it, picking out a paragraph or two at random. Thankfully, as the whole book is uniformly excellent, it didn't matter what I read, and anyway nothing could have upstaged a co-presenter smoking a joint as fat as a King Edward cigar and drinking down a pint of export lager at a single convulsive gulp.

The combined effect, a contemporary novelist remarked to me at breakfast next day, was a sort of monitory *Before and After*. You start out an elegant polemicist on intoxicants and finish up in a state of wasted bedragglements. Other than my beloved, who was sitting in the front row with a tickled-pink expression throughout, I was barely aware of the audience at all, only that I had possibly participated in a hapless shambles for which people had paid ready money. As far as I know, there isn't a video of it. If there is, I might pay ready money to have it destroyed. Still, it's sometimes worth humiliating yourself. Imagine my delight when it turned out my fee for the fiasco was half-a-dozen bottles of champagne.