



## The Festival Experience

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Mark Blayney

**A**T A FESTIVAL, you are at the centre of life — and also at its edge. I think that's the appeal. You're surrounded by stimulation, bright colours, movement, and enticing aromas from the burger van. But you're also aware that it's not really real. It is liminal, elusive, artificial. Make hay at the most well-known and you'll see what I mean. After you've lost yourself in the surrounding countryside – and are unsure even if you're in Wales or England – you arrive at a temporary city. White tent flaps billow. The walkways are planks, sounding hollowly like a stage set. Strips of fake grass help you on your way. Turn a corner and there's Dawn French, laughing at something Margaret Atwood has just said. David Baddiel's just wandered past Jarvis Cocker. Over there... You get the idea.

The fact that you're likely to have had too much caffeine or alcohol, or Reggae Reggae sauce (depending on your stimulant of choice) only enhances the somewhat unreal effect. Go to the quietest cafe in a valiant attempt at a reality check and you might find Russell T. Davies sitting opposite you, laughing and joking. 'Shouldn't you be in the Green Room?' you ask him. 'No,' he says — 'this is the festival, where the real people are!'

Some writers will tell you that the festival experience generates angst. Will anyone come to my talk? Can I cope if I'm in a tent with four children and a dog, and my book's a crime thriller with nine deaths on the first page? Or – perhaps worse – I have a packed crowd, will I get stage fright? Are there hecklers? Will I get asked a question and go blank?



If this is you, go with the flow and see what happens. Switch off your overactive writer's sensors. Play the role of someone who feels happy at a festival, and you'll be happy at a festival.

As for the fear of going blank at questions — you always get asked who your favourite writers are, and I turn into a headlight-struck rabbit. So now I write them down on a piece of paper. This makes the problem part of the solution. When the inevitable question comes along, explain 'Oh I can never remember, so...', pull the bit of paper out and you get a laugh. Getting a laugh is good, even – or especially – with that crime novel with fourteen dead bodies on the first page. I know it was nine before, but it's been a few minutes.

What else do people always ask? 'How do you get your ideas?' If this seems a silly question to you: try not to say that. Think ahead and make up a reason. You're a creator! Invent. And if your audience is bijou – shall we say – involve them. Build rapport. Have options on hand. Give choices — 'I could read the opening, or choose something from later on'; let them decide. If you can be funny, go for funny over serious — it eases the wheels. You'll be enjoying yourself before you realise it.