



The Festival Experience

Marcus Chown

DORIS LESSING SITS on stage at Cheltenham's Everyman Theatre, straight-backed, steel-grey hair tied back in a bun, the epitome of a serene English woman — though she was born in Iran. There is something godlike about Lessing, a sense she sees *everything*, and it is obvious, from the nervousness of the interviewer, a professor of English, that he feels this too. It's audience question time. A man says something patronising about African music – Lessing grew up in Zimbabwe – and follows it with: 'I haven't read any of your novels but my wife says they are *quite* good.' Faster than a knife flying through the air – and with equally devastating effect – she says: 'You need a good slapping!'

At the Everyman again... Ninety-one-year-old Alistair Urquhart is being interviewed about his book, *The Forgotten Highlander*. Captured by the Japanese in Singapore, he survived the Burma Railway. When the Japanese retreated, he was sent to Japan. Conditions were so bad on the ship that it was a relief when it was torpedoed. After days clinging to wreckage in the South China Sea, he was picked up by a Japanese fishing boat. Sent to work in a mine near Nagasaki, he came up after his shift and felt the blast wave of an atomic bomb. Urquhart never received an army pension because all records were lost in Singapore. And he never received an apology from the Japanese. As I listen, I think: 'If *nobody else* stands up and applauds this man, *I will*.' The interview ends. And 650 people stand up as one, giving him a thunderous ovation. I meet Urquhart at the book signing afterwards. A lovely man, he is with his 'toy girl' and ballroom-dancing partner, and he tells me he teaches computing to *old people*. Talk about triumph of the human spirit!



These are two snapshots of my experience of literary festivals as a punter. But I have also had experiences as a participant...

In Edinburgh, I intend to book-end my talk with a spacey slides show set to Elton John's 'Rocket Man' and David Bowie's 'Space Oddity' but there is no sound. It seems my version of PowerPoint is incompatible with the Festival's. Incredibly, a man in the audience has a rock guitar and offers to play live. The audience absolutely loves it.

At an event in Lancaster, I have one person in the audience. It's raining outside and she is doing her knitting, so it's obvious why she is here. I feel better later when I read that novelist Jonathan Coe had a worse experience. Looking out at a single person in his audience, he said: 'Thank God there's one of you here.' And the man said: 'I'm here to introduce you.'

One time, after doing a talk at Cheltenham, my wife and I are given coloured wristbands to let us into other events. The expectation, probably, is that we will go to one or two. We go to forty-one. What we discover is that, even if you pick random events, you will enjoy pretty much everything you see and very likely have unforgettable experiences.