

News Edinburgh festival

# Surprisingly hooked on a puppet's tale of fishing quotas

Julia Horton

When a flotilla of fishing boats sailed up the Thames earlier this summer in protest over European catch limits it was a political drama. But fishing quotas is not a topic of political interest that many might suppose would translate into drama for the stage.

But theatre group Smoking Apples have proved any doubters wrong with an award-winning production about fishing rights, which is proving to be a surprise hit at the Fringe.

Angry fishermen supporting Brexit in frustration over EU quotas were joined on their London rally by Nigel Farage, the former Ukip leader, who gave a typically combative performance at the pre-vote demonstration, trading insults with pro-Remain singer Bob Geldof, who appeared aboard a pleasure craft.

The actors in Smoking Apples, meanwhile, found themselves battling sea sickness when they joined a trawler for a day to research their ambitious show, exploring the complicated system of sharing out fishing allocations.

In *Our Hands* combines puppetry and mime to explain how quotas set by the EU restricting catch to prevent stocks being wiped out by overfishing are handed out by the UK and Scottish governments based on historic catch records.

The play, which sold out at earlier performances in London, highlights the way these rights have become a commodity controlled by a handful of larger operators who can sell to the highest bidder, leaving many small-scale inshore fishermen struggling to pay for permissions needed to bring their catch ashore.

Alf, the central puppet character, battles mounting debt and alcoholism as he is bombarded with requests from a bigger firm to buy his quota.

The story has a happy ending loosely based on that of Stefan Gliniski, a Cornish trawlerman, who spotted a lucrative new market for sardines, for which

no quota is currently required due to their abundance after the public's past appetite for the fish waned.

The actors hope that their show, which has received several four and five star reviews at Edinburgh's Underbelly, will help more fishermen emulate Gliniski's success by boosting public understanding and creating a greater demand for more sustainable fish.

Matt Lloyd, co-artistic director of Smoking Apples, whose last show was about motor neurone disease, said they enjoyed trying to make complicated subjects accessible to people.

Voicing shock at the allocations system, he said it seemed "unfair" that smaller vessels, which made up the majority of the fleet, only received a tiny percentage of the allocation needed to land popular species like cod. Meeting Gliniski also made them realise that public demand "ultimately caused overfishing", which led to bigger companies knocking out smaller ones because they could afford to sell their fish more cheaply.

He added: "For the first 40 minutes the show is about the [situation] now and the struggle of the fishermen in the industry. The last 20 minutes tells the story of what could happen if people caught other fish and they became popular."

The company received funding from Arts Council England to develop the visual theatre show, which won best work in progress at London's Mimetic Festival in 2014.

It has attracted audiences of 70-90 to the 120-seat venue in Edinburgh's Cowgate.

Fans include researchers from the New Economics Foundation think-tank, which recently likened the allocation system to giving a few big operators "squatters' rights" to the nation's multi-million pound fisheries.

Chris Williams, NEF researcher, said: "The actors have really understood that quotas are an asset which large companies want to buy up, and it's become a real case of the haves and the have-nots."

## Feel-good, feel-angry Fringe favourite

Theatre Ann Treneman

Glasgow Girls Assembly

★★★★☆

The queue stretched out down and around the street for this one, a Fringe favourite. It's a feel-good, feel-angry musical about a city that may have invented that particular emotional combination. It dates from 2012, and this tale about a group of Glasgow schoolgirls, who take on the world (OK, London) to save their asylum-seeking friend

from deportation, does feel in need of an update.

The story itself is familiar enough: the seven girls from Dumbarton who fought back when one of their own, a Roma gypsy from Kosovo, was threatened with deportation.

The musical, set in their school, begins in a classroom where they are being taught English by an inspirational teacher. It is directed by Cora Bissett, written by David Greig, and presented by Pachamama Productions, the National Theatre of Scotland and Regular Music.

The stage vibrates with energy and it is impossible to stay aloof. You can feel the pull, the gumption, the "Smells Like Teen Spirit" confidence of this production. The performers playing the girls — Roanna Davidson, Sophia Lewis, Stephanie McGregor, Shannon Swan, Kara Swinney and Aryana Ramkhalawon —



are uniformly good. Also worth a mention is Callum Cuthbertson as their teacher, quietly supportive, politically brave.

It feels dated, though, possibly because the issue of asylum and immigration has continued to fester. The whole thing is set before the Scottish referendum, the Syrian war, the refugee crisis and Brexit. Never mind that some of the jokes about Glasgow feel old enough to be in a care home.

The production is a bit scrappy (but this isn't the Fringe), and some of the sound levels were very uneven. The multi-level set (Jessica Brettell) is supremely versatile. I particularly like the fact that they do not shy away from the dark side of this issue. I am quite sure that this isn't the end of the story for this musical but it has aged quickly. Box office 0131 623 3030, until August 28

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# 'Music can help break down social barriers'

Marin Alsop believes in tackling divisions and elitism, and in the value of music education, Mike Wade writes

Tonight a packed auditorium will welcome an old friend. Marin Alsop, the former principal guest conductor of the RSNO, makes her Edinburgh International Festival debut in front of the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra (OSESP). Since she rehearsed in the draughty old Usher Hall of the 1990s, her musicians sometimes wrapped in winter coats against the cold, Alsop has become a key figure in world music, the most famous woman conductor in the world and, in 2013, the first to conduct the Last Night of the Proms.

But if she is perceived as a trail blazer, it is her practical contribution to music education that is most striking. She has been involved in a series of initiatives which tackle class and gender divides, at the same as tackling the elitism surrounding the genre. Her roles as music director of both the OSESP and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra have been pivotal in her efforts.

All this interviewer knows about Alsop's adopted US home city is its symphony orchestra, and the deep social tensions expressed in five series of *The Wire*, the brilliant small-screen portrayal of crime in a divided city.

Alsop seizes on the allusion: "This is exactly the kind of neighbourhood my kids live in," she says. "And this is the United States. It is not OK for an incredibly wealthy country to accept living conditions like this for children. When people focus on it, people realise it is not right at all — but generally they try not to focus on it."

Alsop has a son of her own, with her partner, Kristin Jurkscheit. When she says "her children" in this context she is referring to the thousands of youngsters who have enrolled on OrchKids, the programme she

founded in 2008, to combat the ghettoisation of the city.

In its first year, 30 kids signed up for the scheme. Now, annually, 1,100 youngsters are involved.

"I feel strongly that as a kid, for me, having the opportunities to learn an instrument was transformative, a way to express oneself that is unlike anything else," she said. "It is extremely validating when you play an instrument. People say, 'Wow!' They listen to what you have to say. But it also develops tremendous skills, and these are transferable.

"Practising, for example: motivating yourself to do something consistently — music requires discipline, athleticism, co-ordination. You have to work with others, to create an ensemble; there is a lot of conflict resolution. Working as a team, while as an artist you have a very strong sense of self.

"Access to emotional fulfilment is great, but these other skills are applicable in all walks of life."

In São Paulo, a musical academy has taken root over the last decade, offering people under 26 an apprenticeship. Annually, 20 young instrumentalists and 20 singers reap the benefits and — at Alsop's instigation — four conductors.

These kinds of programmes "really are critical" says Alsop. A recent Johns Hopkins University study showed that any child involved in "an identity project" outside school or family, "creates an atmosphere of success for that child later in life."

This evening's programme is centred on the *Chichester Psalms*, Leonard Bernstein's exhilarating choral invocation for peace,

interpreted by his old friend and pupil with her young and gifted charges. For Alsop it is the "perfect piece" for the occasion. The *Chichester Psalms* not only honour Edinburgh's choral tradition, but also help to break down the boundaries she so deplures in music.

Alsop, 59, is the only child of two professional musicians. Her mother, Ruth, was a cellist. Lamar, her father, was concertmaster of the New York Ballet Orchestra, and a brilliantly versatile studio artist who collaborated with Aretha Franklin,



Marin Alsop is set to conduct the São

Paulo Symphony Orchestra in Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* at Usher Hall

Frank Sinatra, Michael Jackson, and Nina Simone. "Our house," said Alsop, with a smile, "was not particularly strict in terms of sticking to the classical music canon."

At nine, Alsop had a defining experience when she was taken by her father to see her "home town team", the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Bernstein. She recalled: "It was like being struck by lightning. I turned to my dad and said: 'I want to be a conductor.' My dad said: 'Sounds good to me.' Bernstein became my idol: I had a poster of him and The Beatles as I grew up."

She had begun playing piano at two, and went on to take a place at Yale, transferring to the Juilliard music school, where she completed a masters in violin performance. In her early thirties she won a Leonard Bernstein Conducting Fellowship at the Tanglewood Music Center.

She recalls her studies under Bernstein with warmth and gratitude. Alsop said: "Part of me was worried about meeting my hero and being disappointed. But when eventually I met him and he was so warm to me, like an incredibly generous teacher: giving, demanding, funny.

"This was about much more than just music. I hung out at his apartment in New York. I saw how he embraced causes he believed in, or expressed an opinion by writing a newspaper article.

"For him, music was a vehicle to achieve some kind of societal impact; art as a motivator and as a refuge for people. When the Berlin Wall came down, he was there with Beethoven 9 and musicians from around the world. He was involved with Solidarity in Poland, making music always. But for him, it was a form of political activism. Always teaching, always giving back, always trying to connect the world to music in a broad stroke, so classical music could be relevant to people. That was inspiring."

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In his activism, says Alsop, Bernstein recognised that artists have "a great opportunity to make a broader contribution to the world." A little of the spirit should rise again tonight. São Paulo Symphony Orchestra at Usher Hall, tonight at 7.30pm

## The chairman's nightmare began

A bravura performance by the novelist James Kelman, below, in the big tent in Charlotte Square, where his extraordinary opening salvo was a rare treat for fans of his prose, and an interminable nightmare for Brian Taylor, his seemingly redundant chairman.

Those familiar with *Dirt Road*, Kelman's beautifully musical peripatetic through America's south, will love the sequence where Murdo, the young hero, first becomes acquainted with the lovely Sarah, and her talented family. It is a long, important section — the very passage which Kelman had chosen for the book festival crowd. On and on he went. Ten minutes passed, then 15, then 20, 25 minutes in, Taylor began re-arranging his feet nervously. At half an hour, he cast a doleful glance at the audience, and his face began to redden. Would he have to butt in? At 35 minutes, finally Jim reached what he judged to be the end, and sat down. At last. Chairman Taylor beamed like a late night commuter who awakes from a bad dream to find that he hasn't missed his stop.

Loose connections. And so to the (inevitably brief) question and answer session. Kelman again was brilliantly Kelmanesque, his gravely voice revealing both the secrets of his novel and an assortment of peculiar information from the recesses of his mind. Who knew there could be connection between the newsagent John Menzies and Charlie Mingus, jazz legend? More was to follow. Kelman remembered speaking in San Francisco: "I flummoxed the audience by saying, 'What is it that me and Dizzy Gillespie have in common?'"

What comes after *Sappy Songs*? *Club Cumming*, of course, and the opportunity for the talented and high-spirited, (or both) to take to the stage with Wee Alan. Step forward Sir Jonathan Mills (whom, we hear, has taken to calling himself plain "Jonny"), who brought with him a sheaf of teasing poems by the late Dorothy Porter, an out-and-proud lesbian from his native Australia. They were, to be frank, a tad risqué. "The cutest freak is an idiot boy in a frock," squeaked Sir Jonny from the stage, to the cheers of the multitude. "The cutest freak can sing in a falsetto." Sneekie made his excuses and left.



## Big dreams in need of invention

Dance Debra Craine

And Now... ZOO Southside

★★★★☆

This overlong and undercooked show seems to be about the gulf between childhood and adulthood and the responsibility involved in growing up. Should we or shouldn't we? If given a choice, would we even want to become adults, or is childhood the less scary option?

Yet reading the programme note by Frank McConnell, director of the dance-theatre troupe plan B and choreographer (along with the dancers) of *And Now...*, I see that he is working from a more specifically political agenda. Somehow embracing the Scottish and EU referendums and the intense debate they

generated, this production sets out to explore the impact of those debates on Scotland and its prospects in a post-Brexit future. Knowing that, I can appreciate the sense of scale that informs the ZOO stage, where chairs of all sizes, from miniature to one fit for a giant, lie scattered. Size is a constant reference point in the show, with Scotland appearing to identify itself as the small child in the room.

It's in this landscape of shifting perspectives that four dancers — one man and three women (they are joined on stage by the musician Steve Kettleby, who plays saxophone) — cavort like youngsters, tentatively evolving with fear and hope into adulthood (or should that be statehood?), and learning to cope within a wider world of power and control. What do these kids want to be? A bus driver, a firefighter, a nurse; beautiful, smart, happy. Their childhood dreams seem

almost wistfully naive. With its dipping, circular energy and seessawing phrases, the choreography is tediously repetitive and certainly not inventive enough to sustain itself. Some of the physical metaphors — such as Glen McArtney finding his balance on the biggest chair — are stretched beyond the point of interest, though a few of the duets find an emotional resonance missing elsewhere in the dance.

The main problem with *And Now...* is its lack of structure and the paucity of its dance invention. It may have big dreams but it needs an even bigger dose of theatrical reality to make them thrive on stage. Box office 0131 662 6892 until August 27

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## Well-judged and quietly moving

Theatre Allan Radcliffe

Don't Panic! It's Challenge Anneka Summerhall

★★★★☆

The term "national treasure" has become a little devalued in recent years, but back in the Eighties and early Nineties, Anneka Rice, the television star, really did inspire love and admiration among the British public for her endlessly cheery, empathic persona and the plucky "can do" spirit she embodied in her long-running reality show, *Challenge Anneka*.

She was everyone's kindly fairy godmother in fluorescent shell suit top, leggings and bum bag. The name alone is probably enough to attract Fringe-goers of a certain vintage over the threshold, even if Sophie

Winter's one-woman show features only the briefest appearance from the legend herself, via pre-recorded video clip.

Instead, Winter seeks to invoke the spirit of Anneka to explore and surmount the chronic anxiety she has lived with for most of her adult life.

Though this sounds like a heavy premise, the show wears its examination of mental health issues lightly. Winter, in blonde wig and headset, welcomes her audience with cartons of Ribena and packets of Haribo Bears (her favoured childhood accompaniment to weekly episodes of *Challenge Anneka*) before introducing us to Hollie, a young woman so raddled by daily life that she can no longer cope with her job as a teacher or her regular commute on the tube.

Winter, a versatile actress, inhabits all the roles in Hollie's story, through an ambitious mix of live performance and

filmed segments. Her impersonation of Rice leaves something to be desired yet there are plenty of fine supporting characterisations, including Hollie's unsympathetic male boss, a wide-eyed schoolboy and assorted mental health experts. The most poignant moment comes towards the end when Hollie starts berating herself for her affliction, as though someone from her privileged background should really know better.

There are a couple of hiccups and hesitations in the interaction between the various elements of the performance, and the narrative does rather run out of steam towards the end.

Still, Winter is a talented, engaging storyteller and her treatment of mental health and its stigma is well-judged and quietly moving. Box office: 0131 560 1581, to August 28

## Sparring with bigots in just 140 characters

Comedy Dominic Maxwell

Cakes Just the Tonic at the Mash House

★★★★☆

Have you heard the one about the Muslims-only cake shop in Bristol? In his Fringe debut, the east London comic Bilal Zafar, right, gets a delicious hour out of the Twitterstorm that ensued after he went along with a jokey tweet from his brother suggesting that he was running just such a joint. It was a riposte, in part, to

the boycott muslim businesses campaign. Yet what started as a gag or two spiralled as Zafar got deeper into character, willfully misspelling his tweets to resemble a caricatured immigrant as he boasted about his "chocolot" or "lemon drizzle" cakes. Soon he was sparring with members of the English Defence League who were outraged that such an establishment was open — but not so outraged that they actually did any research into whether "Zafarcakes" actually existed; not so outraged that they took any notice of the picture of Zafar on the stage of The Comedy Store on his Twitter profile.



This is like the 2016 version of *The Henry Root Letters*, or *The Timewaster Letters*, except in 140 characters or less. And Zafar takes us through it all with wry reserve, showing his exchanges on a screen as "my tiny joke got out of hand".

Some people would be properly upset by the sort of comments that he got. Instead, he says without too much feeling, "it was a little bit depressing", but a spur to deepen the parody.

With so much reliance on the Twitter exchanges, it's a limited guide as to what kind of a comedian he is going to be. His restrained wit, and ability to drop in the odd more serious point about hate crime rising after Brexit, about the ill-focused anger that's in the air, makes you want to see him muscle into the narrative more.

And after a gorgeous first 40 minutes or so, he lets his show peter out with a listless Q&A session and a subdued ending. Yet for the most part *Cakes* is witty and absorbing and slightly appalling and highly entertaining. I look forward to whatever Zafar cooks up next. Box office: 0131 226 0000, until August 28