

# Edinburgh Festival

INTERNATIONAL

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## Out of Alphabetical order

Famous for 14 words: Victor Miguel describes an opening night he wouldn't have missed for anything

**D**ON'T sing, I don't dance, and I can't act and, yet, I have found my way into the Edinburgh International Festival, and on stage at the Royal Lyceum Theatre. This is not the story of a star being born, I was not discovered behind a bar during the Festival, as the Edinburgh mythology goes, neither Madonna nor Britney need panic. I am one of the seven-strong Edinburgh cast who over the past week have joined Mikel Rouse, John Kelly, David Vaughan, and Merce Cunningham from New York in John Cage's *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet*. The local cast is an assortment of professional performers and complete novices: it includes the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, the

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director of the Fringe, the director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, and the chairman of the Bank of Scotland. My involvement came through my fascination with John Cage, certainly not through my experience as a performer. The last time I trod the boards I was a nine-year-old orphan in a school production of *Annie* – as you might expect this experience has been quite different.

The week of rehearsals began, just us seven in a dance studio somewhere in Gorgie, clutching our scripts – or hanging on for dear life. We seemed to share the same mixture of emotions, genuine fear, excitement, and love for the words we were reading out to each other. As this first rehearsal went on I came to realise how much richer the text had become now freed from the monotony that was the voice in my head as I had read it over to myself. The piece, originally a radio play, was constructed using chance operations from the words of the characters that appear in the piece and Cage's own words – John will tell you this as you sit in the theatre waiting for the curtain. Only the part of James Joyce is constructed wholly from his own words. When Cage read the play he always took the part of Joyce, rather than the narrator, such was his love of this author. At each rehearsal the piece became more complete, more layers were added; the New York cast, the sound effects, the sound score, the set and lighting, and, finally, the costumes.

My mother, who has been attempting to dress me in pink for 24 years, is very amused by my costume, which consists of an incredibly vibrant pink T-shirt. I am less happy, but this seems to be the most basic requirement of a performer – the removal of your free will. I have never previously been involved in anything that has

so efficiently removed my personality. Our speech is written, our movements are choreographed, and our costumes decided upon for us. Although I find myself complicit with the requests of our director, Laura Kuhn, as one of the group who is ultimately a part of the stage set more than a character, I find this to be the most interesting aspect of the whole experience, the loss of self. With the movements, however, a little freedom comes. There are nine movement changes; three are to fixed positions, the remaining six allow for an element of choice, which is fittingly indeterminate. But all of these must be held completely still for, at the most, 15 minutes, which has become both a physical and emotional battle with myself.

I have one of the smallest parts, which I was not truly thankful for until half past seven on Thursday night, sitting on stage behind the curtain listening to the hum of the full house convinced that I had lost all control of my physical self. I play the nineteenth-century American economist Thorstein Veblen whose two lines at that moment seemed like a gift from above; surely I could not forget those 14 words. The rehearsals had been fun. Over the week we became quite a sociable group bonded

together by our nervous fear and, for most of us, the novelty of the whole experience.

A particularly memorable rehearsal was joined halfway through by a ballet class of six-year-old girls in pink tutus giggling and dancing to the theme tune to the *Pink Panther* in the room next door; their sense of rhythm was noted as absent.

As Thursday went on and the press call and filmed dress rehearsal passed, the dreams I had been having since I agreed to be in the play began to haunt me. The forgetting of my lines, the falling off the stage, the missing of cues, all became inevitable. James Joyce says to Satie: "Your dreams have all been true" – **thankfully mine were not.** Satie in turn prescribes bad sleep (and thus bad dreams) to a lack of music in one's life – perhaps I should take his diagnosis to heart for the future.

Opening night was the most terrifying hour and 20 minutes of my entire life and I'm sure now that I will never do this again, but I wouldn't have missed this for the world. I have had the luxury of really getting to know the text and all of its intricate nuances. It was certainly worth losing myself in the whole that is *An Alphabet*. I have been looking forward to

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seeing this production for many months now, yet, ironically, I have no idea how it looks to the audience. We are assured that the silhouettes and shapes we create on stage, combined with the lighting, look magical and that we manage to bring some of Cage's renowned humour into the words of our characters. I have to rely on the assurances of those who have been able to see it – I hope to return as a member of the audience when it is performed in New York in April of next year. The experience ended on Thursday with a bottle of Glenmorangie at the dressing-room door, a thank you from the Edinburgh International Festival, a treat that was both necessary and divinely delicious.

**The final Festival performance of James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet is at the Royal Lyceum tonight.**