

Sticky Fingers Festival

9 –18 May 2009 in Newry, County Down, NI

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Two years on from their inaugural early arts festival, **Sticky Fingers** mounted their second, an ambitious programme spanning two weekends combining national and international theatre performances, arts and craft workshops, storytelling and music, professional development workshops and discussions. Fittingly, integrated within the programme, **Sticky Fingers** in partnership with *Action for Children's Arts* (ACA) launched the Northern Ireland Manifesto for Children's Arts.

Presented in the diverse locations of town venues, a forest park and within and around a picturesque castle, the festival attracted a wide range of audiences, and a high level of cultural and political profile. With the numbers of performances weighted on both weekends, with far fewer mid-week shows to see, this was not designed to be a "delegates" festival; that said, I'd suggest more peers would have been welcome, and welcomed. Although, disappointingly, uptake for some of the mid-week performances was low, some of this work has been able to reach farther-flung audiences thanks to the touring programme **Sticky Fingers** had supplemented for a few of these companies.

Family Audiences

However, the family events featured over both weekends attracted larger numbers, despite the tempestuous weather that threatened to blight the outdoor performances for the culmination of the festival. With performances rescheduled and relocated indoors, the spirit of the final weekend remained buoyant, with families happy either to brave the elements for a workshop or two, or retreat to the splendour of the castle's reception rooms, library, ballroom and basement for an eclectic mix of performances. At times the theatrical conditions were compromised, but this was offset by the idiosyncratic charm of the setting. Fireside stories and the impromptu busking from the multi- talented **Cahoots NI** company entertained bedraggled audiences patiently accommodating the rescheduled timetable.

Included in the festival over the few days that I attended were **Monkeyshine's** delightful *The Bedmaker* that transported up to six children in a giant bed on a journey into space to find another planet (I observed this with a smaller family unit of four, two parents, two children – what a very, very special occasion for them) Karen Torley of **Banyan Theatre**, the Derry-based half of this established puppet/object theatre company for early years with *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, the exuberant and highly entertaining Cahoots NI with brand new show, *The Family Hoffmann*, and new work for Under 3's by **Sarah Argent** and **Tam Tam Theatre**, respectively *Out of the Blue* and *Circles in the Sand*, Also featured were the eternally charming **Puppet State Theatre** with *The Man Who Planted Trees*; the Polish company **Blum Theatre Studio** with *What's that?* and return visits from **La Baracca** (Italy) with *Looking at the*

Sky, and ***Helios Theater*** (Germany) with *Woodbeat*. Closer to home, the richness of Irish culture, north and south, was in evidence through the work of companies and artists such as ***Liz Weir***, ***The Armagh Rhymers***, ***The Ulster Orchestra***, ***Cup and Crowns***, and with workshops provided by ***Sticky Fingers***, ***Groundswell*** and ***Firefly*** (Heather Fulton and Rosie Gibson).

With just five core staff, plus a team of hard-working technicians drafted in, ***Sticky Fingers*** do not shy away from enterprise and ambition. The Festival is just one aspect of their impressive productivity. Look out for their next festival, with hope for kinder weather.

www.stickyfingersarts.co.uk