

MAYDAYS IN GLASGOW

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Glasgow taxi drivers would seem to have made a strong impression on participants in Mayfest. Whoopi Goldberg was there two years ago, and said that every time she climbed into a taxi the driver told her, 'Glasgow's got an awfy reputation'. Marie Jones, of the Belfast theatre company Charabanc, recalls that every time she got into a taxi the driver would talk about Mayfest and what was happening when and where. A real test of the true popularity of a festival?

Mayfest was born in 1983, sub-titled 'Glasgow's International Festival of Popular Theatre and Music'. It had long been felt by prominent trade unionists and theatre workers that May Day, in a city with strong labour movement connec-

the shows and houses averaged 80%. And there was a surprising plea from those who didn't come. 'Suddenly the cry went up, what about us? Can we have something?' Community groups all over the city expressed an interest in hosting events. A community events organiser was appointed, and now Feri wonders why Mayfest is based in the city centre at all. Now companies visit the chic theatre clubs and the unemployed workers' centres and play at the Citizens' Theatre and Easterhouse Community Centre.

More importantly the community events have been participatory. This year a centrepiece will be a History of Govan, featuring the people of Govan, and scores of other groups will be presenting new



In the community: Charabanc theatre company will be performing *Gold in the Streets* at venues all over the city.

they began work at the same time as Glasgow district council decided to persuade the world and the city's citizens that 'Glasgow was Miles Better'. The district council have increased their grant aid from £30,000 in 1983 to £100,000 this year enabling the festival to be expanded from two to three weeks. Jean McFadden, council leader and chair of the Mayfest board of directors, did not see Mayfest as a cosmetic exercise and a cultural complement to Scotland's number one tourist attraction, the Burrell Collection. As she stated at Mayfest's second press conference, the slogan might be 'Glasgow's Miles Better' but for those living in the city's sprawling housing estates, who couldn't even afford the bus fare into the city centre, let alone a theatre ticket as well, there was not a lot to smile about. It is hoped that Mayfest's community events can at least give people an opportunity to see good professional theatre and music for as little as £1.



Street theatre: Glasgow school kids participate in the Mayfest too.

tions, should not be the end but the beginning of a celebration. Thus with donations from Equity and the Transport and General Workers' Union, the festival director, Feri Lean, was able to acquire a desk and a phone, and set about establishing an international festival.

Three festivals later Mayfest could well claim to have achieved such international status. Why? 'Word of mouth, people just love coming,' says Feri, 'in 1984 the Cuban company Teatro Escumbray were here, this year we have two more Cuban performers coming because they were told everyone had such a great time.' A sentiment echoed by Marie Jones. 'It's the only festival Charabanc has been where we feel it has genuinely attempted to bring entertainment to everyone, more than Edinburgh or our own festival here in Belfast.'

The first Mayfest even took its organisers by surprise: 28,000 people came to see

plays. Community groups have also had the opportunity to present their shows in the city centre. They sometimes met with sparse audiences, as have the professional groups in the community venues - but it takes time to build up audiences.

Mayfest were perhaps fortunate that



Mayfest 86: Christopher House, Canadian choreographer and dancer, will be at the Mitchell Theatre.

Feri Lean feels that Mayfest's success is due to the fact that the people of Glasgow simply took the festival to their hearts. Bars and restaurants open late and often have their own live entertainment. Organisations as diverse as the French Institute, the Labour party, the Scottish Postal Board, and McEwan's lager have sponsored events. As well as foreign theatre companies, Mayfest gives many Scottish companies the chance to present their work on a larger scale than usual, and to foreign critics who don't often get the chance to see Scottish companies. Although it is 35 years younger, Mayfest has found itself compared to the Edinburgh Festival. Not a comparison Mayfest necessarily approves of: 'We're two different festivals, with different histories, trying to do different things'. Mayfest has certainly not lived in the shadow of the Edinburgh Festival. With many companies making their only