

# Reaping Fringe benefits

## Record sales as crowds flock to the first day of world's most famous arts festival

THIS year's Edinburgh Festival Fringe was launched yesterday on a record-breaking wave of advance ticket sales.

As the colourful, curtain-raising cavalcade took place, organisers revealed that they had sold thousands more early tickets than ever before.

Stars such as Paul Merton, Christian Slater, Morrissey and Nancy Cartwright – the voice behind Bart Simpson – are attracting huge interest on the 58th Fringe, with some performances, by acts such as The Streets and Dido, already sold out.

Around 100,000 tickets were snapped up online days before the start of the festival, compared to 89,000 online sales for the entire Fringe last year.

Fringe spokesman Kerryn Hurley said the event was on track to outsell last year, when the million-ticket barrier was broken for the first time.

She said: 'In previous years, certain shows hadn't sold a ticket by the time the festival started, but this year we had sold at least one ticket for every single show before the start.'

'Considering there are 1,695 shows, that is an amazing feat. At this rate, it looks like another fantastic year.' An estimated 150,000 spectators turned

By **Maureen Culley**

out on to the streets yesterday to watch the 3,000-strong cavalcade entertain the crowds.

This year's parade was led by a procession of Harley-Davidson motorbikes, followed by the 900-strong cast of the Edinburgh Military Tattoo. They were joined by dancers from Thailand and Palestine and a giant fire-breathing Chinese Temple Lion.

This year's Fringe, which runs until August 30, will see more than 25,000 performances staged in a record 239 venues.

One of the most hotly tipped shows should see Hollywood actor Christian Slater make his British stage debut, but the first four scheduled nights of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* had to be cancelled after he went down with chickenpox.

Slater, who starred in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, plays Randle P. McMurphy in the production, a role made famous by Jack Nicholson in the Oscar-winning film of 1975.

The Fringe's reputation for hosting quirky, off-beat shows continues, with the more outlandish theatre venues including a curry house and a lift.

Controversial shows include *Hunting Diana*, a whodunnit about the death of

the princess, *Jeffrey Archer's Prison Diary Hell*, about the novelist's time in jail, and *XXX*, by the Spanish company *La Fura Dels Baus*, described as the most sexually explicit show ever staged in Britain.

Police are also anticipating chaos at the hands of shock comic Aaron Barshack, who gained notoriety after he gatecrashed Prince William's 21st birthday party.

He is to be tailed by intelligence officers amid concerns that he will stage further 'comedy terrorist' stunts. The move follows his attempted hijack of a tourist bus heading for Edinburgh Castle last year, during which he was intercepted trying to gain unauthorised entry to the military Tattoo.

Despite facing a hostile reception last year for his show, *Osama Likes It Hot*, he has returned to Edinburgh to run his own venue in a city pub and worried police chiefs are issuing a memo to officers across the city, warning them to be prepared for more outrageous antics from the performer.

A senior officer from Lothian and Borders police said: 'Barshack is a pest. We have no doubt that in order to generate publicity he will try to pull off something that will embarrass someone.'

'We fully expect him to attempt something, possibly at the Tattoo.'

m.culley@dailygill.co.uk



Carnival atmosphere: A Fringe performer yesterday