

**T**HE world's biggest arts festival, a three-week jamboree of the good, the bad and the frankly ridiculous, began yesterday with a cavalcade through Edinburgh watched by a crowd of more than 150,000.

Seventy-five Harley Davidson motorcycles led the parade, followed by the entire cast of the Edinburgh Military Tattoo.

By the end of the month, 3,100 musicians, singers, dancers and actors will have contributed to 25,000 performances of nearly 1,700 shows at 236 venues.

A third of all the acts are staging their world premiere in the Scottish capital this year and for the second time at the city's six summer festivals the organisers hope to sell more than a million tickets.

As ever, the Fringe festival will stage the most outrageous performances and make use of the oddest venues. Shows will be held in a launderette, an Indian restaurant, a lift and a sports car. In *A Mobile Thriller*, by Hush Productions, an actor will perform to an audience of three being driven through the city in a Maserati.

Paul Merton, Rob Brydon and Jenny Eclair are among the big-name comedians and Nancy Cartwright, the voice of Bart Simpson, has her own show.

Top of the list to win the coveted title of "performance most likely to cause public offence" is the final British appearance of *XXX*, a play based on the work of the Marquis de Sade by the Spanish theatre group La Fura dels Baus. It is said to be the most sexually explicit show seen in Britain.

Then there is *Sex Addict*, by Tim Fountain, who plans to contact men on the internet during each performance and have sex with them that night. Each encounter will form the basis of the next day's show and Fountain is seeking 25 men to sleep with over 23 nights.

"People love talking about sex," he said. "Talking about house prices at dinner is fine, but start saying who you slept with and the conversation really takes off."

A show that has already sold out has also been one of the most troubled. The first four nights of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* had to be cancelled after the Hollywood star Christian Slater, who is making his British stage debut, became ill.

The play has also had a change of director after Guy Masterson left, citing stress, to be replaced by Tamara Harvey and the playwright Terry Johnson.

The 58th Fringe was preceded by the city's jazz festival. Already running or still to come are the tattoo, Aug 6-28; the Edinburgh International Festival, Aug 14-30; the book festival, Aug 14-30; and the film festival, Aug 18-29.

David Todd, the director of the cavalcade, said: "It has been a glorious, sunny day and we could not have enjoyed a better way to start the festival."