

THE largest arts festival in the world erupted onto the streets of Edinburgh yesterday with more shows than ever, but organisers issued a warning that the Edinburgh Festival Fringe may have peaked.

Paul Gudgin, the Fringe's artistic director, said: "The Scottish capital can no longer sustain ever larger festivals unless the Scottish Executive is willing to pay millions of pounds on new theatre venues and accommodation."

A shortage of space in the city, which doubles in population every August, means that performers and audiences must put up with higher costs and smaller venues.

Nearly 1,700 shows with 25,000 performances are vying for space in 236 venues this year. Mr Gudgin said that unless public money was invested in the Fringe quality would decline and performers would turn to other festivals.

"If it is going to continue to be the biggest festival, then it will need money to solve its problems," he said. "We have more and more performers, but have we all got places to stay? Are there places to perform? Those two problems are the festival's Achilles' heel."

He suggested that permanent accommodation, in the style of an Olympic village, should be built. "For the Olympics this week 10,000 athletes will be put up in Athens. The Fringe has 15,000 performers. We have to start housing some of those in a temporary or permanent fashion."

Artists are having to find increasingly bizarre locations to perform their works. Unusual venues include an Audi A8, an Indian restaurant and a laundrette. Versions of *Macbeth* will be performed in the Greyfriars Kirkyard cemetery and at the Royal College of Physicians.

But Mr Gudgin said that despite imaginative venues, performers will be forced away from the centre of the city as locations were bought by developers and turned into expensive housing or office blocks. "For example, the *Pod*, which is an old cinema, is a great new venue, but it has a 'for sale' sign above it. I hope it will be a ven-

ue next year, but there is a danger it will be bought and turned into offices."

Although no other city has a festival that comes close to Edinburgh's popularity, insiders are concerned that Liverpool will become a rival when it is made European Capital of Culture in 2008.

Stars continue to flock to Edinburgh, however. This year Christian Slater is scheduled to make his British stage debut when he stars as Randle McMurphy in an all-star production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, although he has yet to perform because of chicken-pox.

Household names such as Paul Merton have joined established comics who have returned to the Fringe such as Mark Thomas, Jenny Eclair and Jeremy Hardy.

Other stars making appearances include Terry Pratchett, who has authorised a musical of his book *Only You Can Save Mankind*, and Nancy Cartwright, who is better known as the voice of Bart Simpson.

A third of all the acts will have their world premiere in the Scottish capital over the next three weeks.

The Fringe began with its traditional cavalcade, featuring 3,000 marchers led by a troupe of motorcyclists riding Harley Davidsons. Some 150,000 spectators turned out to watch as the Edinburgh Military Tattoo marched through the city centre.

More unusual shows include *Overambitious*, a 24-hour non-stop stand-up comedy performance by Mark Watson.

There is the usual clutch of shows vying for controversy. *XXX*, an adaptation of the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy of the Bedroom*, claims to be the most sexually explicit.

It is competing with *Tim Fountain — Sex Addict*, in which the artist cruises dating websites to pick up a date for the night and tells the audience about it the next day.

More than 200,000 tickets have been sold in advance, the majority online. More than 100,000 tickets have been sold over the internet so far, compared with 90,000 for the whole of last year.

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