

Dancing in

Blood-red cavorting statues,
glittering glass bricks,
shimmering fabric walls:
welcome to the new
home of the Edinburgh
Festival. And this used to be a
church, too



Story by **Charlotte Ross** Photographs by **Dov Revesz**

YOU are walking up to a door hewn from dark oak panels and held together by creaking wrought-iron hinges. As you pass through the arched portal, the quiet swish of glass doors opening automatically signals that you're stepping through a time zone, from a Gothic into a futuristic setting. Stretching out before you, a glowing pathway guides you down an otherwise dark tunnel-like corridor. As you move through the archways – illuminated glass underfoot, vaulted stone overhead, pillars like sentinels on either side – you become aware of a deep, sensuous luminosity ahead. At first it's just a red incandescence but gradually, as you draw closer, it builds into a crimson inferno. Out of the blood red emerges a host of phantasmagoric figures, winged humans, centaurs, all dancing, cavorting, animated and flickering with intensity and movement. It is almost as if the walls are alive; a Gormenghast-like breathing, writhing vision.

Don't panic. You are not hallucinating. You haven't stumbled into a Hieronymus Bosch underworld. In fact you are standing at the foot of the main staircase in the Edinburgh Festival Centre and the demonic creatures crawling up and out of the four surrounding walls, from floor to ceiling, are statues. There are around 250 of them, sinuously wrought from hand-twisted wire, hemp-strengthened plaster of Paris and painted the colour of ruby red velvet; the traditional cloth of stage curtains.

Closer inspection reveals that each figure is

an impression of a Festival artiste – dancers, actors, musicians, singers – captured mid-performance. The very top row, perched high up in the gods, is a less refined, less poised crowd. They clap, cough, fidget and snooze. They are fat and thin, balding, beautiful, male, female, young and old. They complete the pantheon of bacchanalian, celebratory exuberance. They are the audience.

Of course, this is a fantasy. This crimson, living wall doesn't exist. But it will. This time next year the building will be breathing a sigh of relief as wave after wave of burnt-out tourists and Festival-goers ebb away, down the cobbled Lawnmarket, clutching enough whisky, cashmere garments and smoked cheddar truckles to keep them going into the next millennium. This time next year, the Festival Centre will be winding down for winter.

But if you were to walk up the Lawnmarket to where the road splices into three – one branch continuing up to the castle ramparts, another winding down to Upper Bow, and the third sweeping round the back of the Castle and down towards Tollcross – at this junction you will see an ocean of sheer electric blue gauze shooting skywards. This flimsy, fluttering summer shift is barely covering the imposing front and elegant, 230 foot spire of the Highland Tolbooth, that big dirty-black church building that isn't a church at all. The only architectural features still visible are a row of blackened, curlicued, witches-hat spires peeping out above the cobweb of azure netting and scaffold that clothes the entire structure.

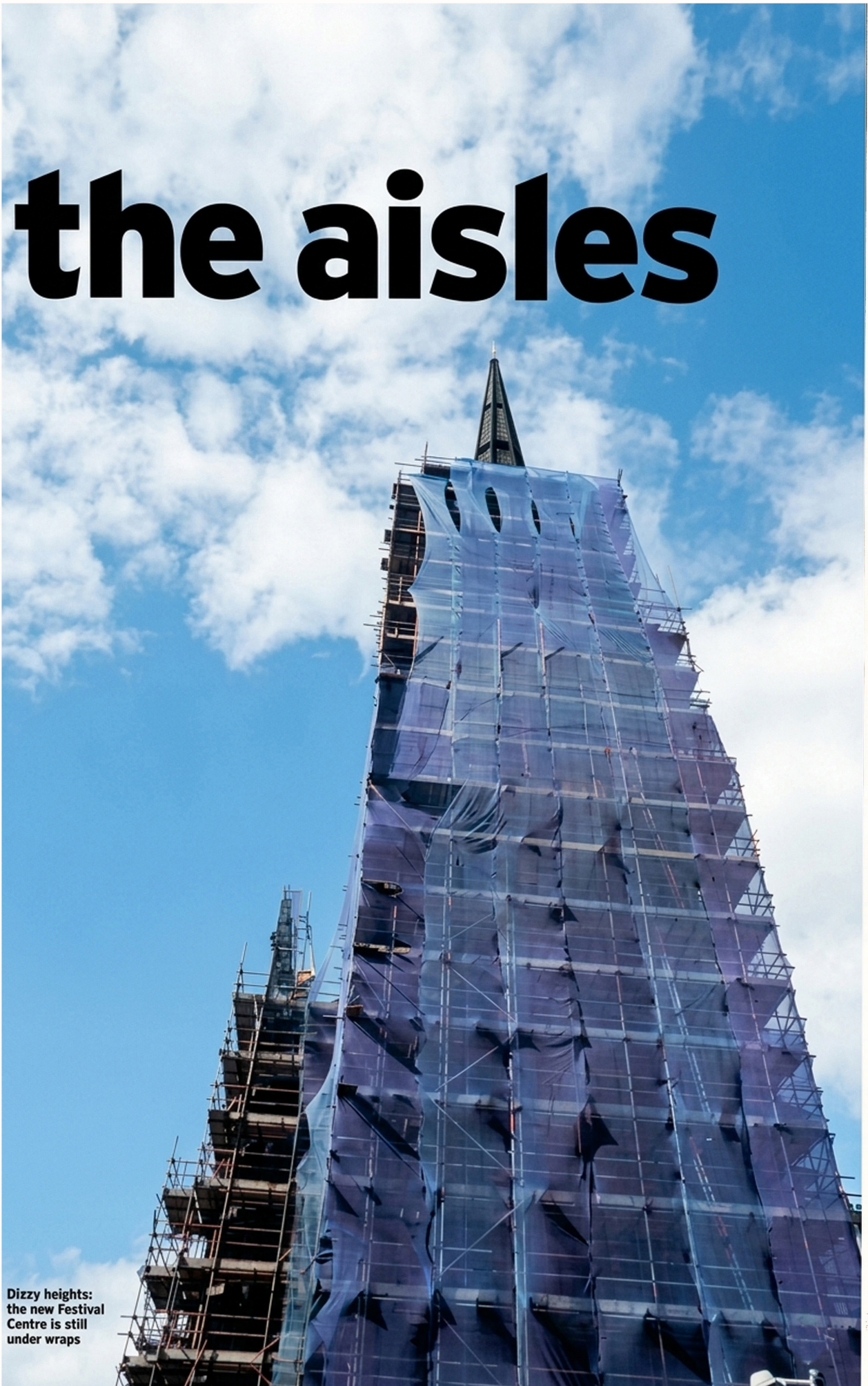
Today, the entrance to the building is a vast dark maw from which the sounds of heavy building work echo relentlessly. The stripped-back, cavernous interior is just another building site of brick, concrete slab, damp stone and dank, cobwebbed gloom. Anticipating the building's future function, a group of workies in the gallery are singing raucously along to the radio. "I love you baa-aaby," they bawl. The acoustics have a way to go, but the impromptu choir still manages to drown out the screech of stone cutters, ominous great crashes and the resounding thumps of heavy hammers.

In his ultra-modern, sunbathed offices just off Johnston Terrace, Ben Tindall is fussing over an immaculate young Finnish man, who looks as if he's just walked off a page in *Wallpaper* magazine. He is working on drawings of the Festival Centre, as it will be, full of beautiful people in Bridget Riley-esque op-art dresses and designer sunglasses, clutching their programmes and pointing in fascination at the wondrous architecture, both new and old, that surrounds them. The drawings are beautifully executed, retro-modern.

The Festival Centre is Ben Tindall's baby. This is maybe why he is taking such care over the design of the clothes worn by punters in his sketches, making sure that the same people appear in drawings made from different elevations. The young Finnish bloke is glacially cool, calm and responsive to Tindall's firm but polite requests for a little more texture on a wall, another swirl on a dress, more detail in a chandelier.

the aisles

Dizzy heights:
the new Festival
Centre is still
under wraps



Tindall is small, bustling and vague with an unkempt beard and clear, unblinking eyes. His office, conveniently, is just across the road from the Highland Tolbooth. He has been gazing out at the former church for years, wondering what could be done with the derelict building. Because he is an architect, he was aware that the dramatic sky-puncturing spire was designed by a young Augustus Pugin, then assistant to James Gillespie Graham, but later to turn his hand to one of Britain's most important and now best recognised edifices, the Houses of Parliament.

In fact, Tindall is responsible for arts architecture all over the city. Significantly, he designed the Fringe shop-front – virtually a symbol of all things festive during the month of August. And now he is charged with the responsibility of creating the future nerve centre of the Edinburgh Festival.

Tindall has a colourful vision. He accredits this, in part to Pugin. "Pugin was really an inspirational architect," he enthuses. "He was English, from French parents, so he has a continental influence, which is where some of the justification for our colours came from." The colours which need justified are certainly bold; bright yellow for the barrel-vaulted ceilings of the lower floor ("not shit brown"), carmine red for the Sculpture Hall. "You associate red with the theatre," he says. "You have crimson drapes; that's standard. And you couldn't have white – that would be very sepulchral." And that wouldn't do at all in this monument to excess and celebration.

As well as illuminated glass bricks, there will be bright tiles specially designed by artists to cover the concrete floor. These, promises Tindall, will be "pretty wild". Upstairs in the Main Hall, the walls will be covered by a diamond-patterned textile designed by the Glasgow firm Squidgy in bright red, gold, green and blue. Strong colours, certainly, but they're shades you can find in any church. "We're trying to make things which are timeless but modern, but fit with that building," says Tindall. "Which is a really tall order."

It's a tall order that has led to rounds of legal bickerings, trouble with planning permission and various to-ings and fro-ings over funding. But earlier this year, the project got the cash and the go-ahead and for the last six months construction has been under way.

The building has had a chequered past, falling in and out of use by various ecumenical bodies since it was completed in 1845 to a design by Gillespie Graham and Pugin. The Victoria Hall, as it was originally called, was purpose-built, using government cash, to house the Church of Scotland Assembly. Although it is a different sort of congregation that is to be accommodated in the Festival Centre, Tindall sees his project as being wholly appropriate for the building. "The current use, as an assembly, for public use, paid for with public money – Lottery money in this case – is not that different from its original purpose," he says.

This might be pushing credulity a little, as Tindall envisages the Centre being used for "social gatherings, it's where you meet the stars, have a drink, coffee, read the papers and reviews ... it'll probably be open day and night." It's hard to imagine upstanding members of the Church of Scotland Assembly chatting with comedians and sipping cappuccino before kicking up an all-night storm on the dance floor, but there is a little anecdotal

evidence of hedonism and celebrity in the aisles. "I was slightly surprised – and rather pleased," Tindall muses, "that people have said they remember excellent jazz and dancing in the committee rooms. The church were using them to have socials and dances."

There is also a photograph of the Duke of York – then Lord High Commissioner – holding court in the upper hall. He is accompanied by his beautiful wife, adorned in a sparkling flapper costume and looking "really attractive" amid 1,000 congregation members dressed in sombre black. The vision in sequins was later to become the Queen Mum, her husband was shortly crowned George VI.

In 1929 it became the HQ of the United Free Church of Scotland, and later was used on and off as a church to house the congregations of Highland and Tolbooth. The former is the Gaelic-speaking section of the church in Edinburgh, while the latter came from further down the High Street, where the city tolbooth used to be. Hence the rather incongruous current title of a building which never really had much to do with the Highlands, and wasn't ever a tolbooth.

It's been well over a decade since the Tolbooth closed its heavy oak doors on the public. Other than a brief glimpse during a recent Doors Open Day, the interior has been barred to Edinburgh residents and the 1.2 million tourists that have yearly passed by its bolted entrance.

During that time a variety of uses have been cited for the empty hall, including a £2.3 million scheme, by the Heritage Project, to install an ambitious multimedia museum entitled The Edinburgh Story. Although Heritage took on a 25-year lease in 1987, they still hadn't begun work on the project three years later and the idea was dumped in 1990.

The Festival Centre development hasn't been without hitches either. Since its inception, there have been difficulties getting planning permission to convert the Grade A listed building into the gloriously colourful, modern creation of Tindall's dreams. It was hoped that the Centre would be open in time for the Festival's 50th celebrations in 1997. And then again in 1998. Securing funding from a variety of bodies, but importantly from the Scottish Arts Council via the Lottery Fund, proved elusive, but eventually £7.3 million was stumped up by LEEL, the former Edinburgh District and Lothian Regional Councils, the Festival's own funds as well as the SAC.

The Centre is now scheduled to open its doors in time for the 1999 Festival, which should come as something of a relief to the staff, who have been struggling in cramped "temporary" accommodation in Market Street for the last 32 years. When it does, the building will house the box office, a bistro-style cafe, a shop, a bar, administration offices, rehearsal rooms, a permanent exhibition and a Festival Club. It expects to attract around 200,000 visitors each year.

During the other 11 months, the Centre will be used not only as a year-round focus for the Festival, but as a co-ordinating point for the International Science Festival and Edinburgh's Hogmanay party, as well as for dinners, functions, rehearsals, recitals, arts study days, evening classes and young people's residencies.

Although the action will focus on the galieried main hall in the upper floor of the Centre, and the whole Festival will be



Performance art: sculptor Jill Watson

Dancing in the aisles

orchestrated from a series of honeycombed administration offices high up in the vaulted roof, the visual focus will be the spectacular, vermilion-hued Sculpture Hall. The function of the hall is to lure visitors, via two spectacular wrought-iron staircases, from the shops and cafes to the spacious upper hall, which is dominated by Pugin's elaborately carved Lord High Commissioner's chair. A lone artist, the Edinburgh-trained sculptor Jill Watson, is responsible for creating each of the 250 dramatic figures that will enliven the walls around the stairs.

Watson lives in Pietrasanta, a small Italian town dedicated to making sculpture, but this August she's been in Edinburgh, soaking up the vibes and fashioning her gracefully manic performers in a makeshift studio in the basement of Ben Tindall's eclectically restored 18th century townhouse.

Classical music tinkles up the winding wooden staircase from the subterranean studio where Watson is working, deep in concentration. She is creating hordes of animated, spindly figures, like Giacomettis without the angst, from copper wire skeletons and handfuls of dripping white plaster.

"I like to use natural materials, the ones that have been used for long enough so you know the results," she says rummaging among bags of hemp of varying coarseness. "The hemp strengthens the plaster; they've been using it for centuries." This is just as well, since her little men and women will be built into the fabric of the wall. Their staying power is vital. But it is the figures' apparent animation that interests her most. "You'll come into the stairway and it'll be full of movement and excitement," she promises. "From the end



Above: architect Ben Tindall and, below, the soon-to-be spectacular sculpture hall



you'll be able to see possibly a single figure looking up and as you go get closer it all opens up into this huge theatre."

For inspiration she's been looking through the Festival archives from the last 50 years, studying groups of performers. "Actors create beautiful compositions because they are very aware of where their body is – dancers as well – they're very spatial positions." She has also been sitting in on shows over the last month and observing the audience. "I've been watching how people clap," she admits. "I'm always looking at people."

Plaster is also an ideal medium for creating the illusion of movement, because it is fluid enough that "you can model and carve." The plaster goes on to a wire armature; there are boxes of ready-twisted mannequins with spindly copper fingers in the studio. She disentangles one to show us. This skeleton will be clad with a finer layer of wire to give shape to the character, and on to the hands will be built a third armature of wire as thin as angel hair.

There's no doubt that Watson has her work cut out. She must sculpt almost one figure a day to meet her deadline, but she remains unfazed by the prospect. Perhaps it is because she can escape to her sun-drenched Italian village and twist her wire and hemp creatures into life, oblivious to the biting easterly winds and driving rain of Edinburgh. Perhaps that is just as well. She can return next year with her boxes of scarlet thespians and add her dramatic splash of colour to Edinburgh.

Looking at the Highland Tolbooth today, with its network of scaffolding, cavernous interior and army of builders, it's hard to believe that in less than a year it will be a thriving hub of colour, light and sound, home to the world's largest and most vibrant arts festival. "It better be!" laughs Tindall, slightly nervously. And then, with more assurance, "I'm sure it will be." **ME**