

Fun with the Fingask Follies

THE FINGASK FOLLIES' MUSICAL REVUES SPARKLE LIKE CHAMPAGNE, WITH TOUCHES OF ACIDITY FROM TIME TO TIME.



Main picture: Last year's cast in the grounds of Fingask Castle. Vocal versatility and charm are key requirements for the players.



Clockwise from top left Kate Feldschreiber, the Follies cellist; The cast in front of the Fingask mural; enjoying pre-show drinks; The Follies playing to a home audience at Fingask. Opposite: The Follies on tour in the Royal College of Physicians.

They have been dubbed the Glyndebourne of the North. They are sassy and sexy. They are the Fingask Follies, one of Scotland's best kept secrets, and their musical revues are like champagne: sparkling, bubbly, with touches of acidity from time to time.

Fingask Follies' shows have been on the circuit in Scotland now for eleven years and Magnus Linklater has said of them that 'They are becoming a fixture like the Edinburgh Festival – and far less strenuous!'

The South has suddenly discovered them. In addition to their usual annual three week tour of country houses and private clubs around Scotland, they had sell-out performances last year for two nights at the Cavalry and Guards Club in Piccadilly. This year they are at the Polish Club (5-6th June). So what is this buzz about the Follies and who are they?

They were started in 1996 by Andrew Threipland of Fingask Castle when he came back home to Scotland from Wales. He bought the 400-year-old family home from his brother and almost immediately decided to revive an old family tradition of drawing room entertainment, which the Threiplands had excelled in over the centuries when they weren't out either curling or revolting against the London and Edinburgh governments.

'Drawing room entertainment,' says Andrew, 'is something everyone has heard of but that is seldom seen. The informality of the venues gives people great pleasure. They just *love* the proximity to the actors. They

like having a handsome young man or pretty young girl flirting with them.'

Not that there was much of that in the Follies' first year when Andrew decided to put on a performance of 'Ossian' lasting three nights. Lofty Buchanan, well known Edinburgh lawyer and stalwart of the Follies, was amongst the small group that started it all off that year.

'Ossian' was quite a gloomy old thing,' he says, 'and it was an ambitious venture. Andrew had dug a large elliptical hole in the ground. It was grassed all over, the bottom flat and the sides all round rising at about 45 degrees, but with no terracing. It would have been ideal for lions and early Christians.'

Undaunted, Andrew Threipland ventured on. The second year (with 'Moonstruck', a theme around the moon) was still tentative and experimental, but by the third year a vital new element was added. Helen Molchanoff, a professional director with credits at the National Theatre, the RSC and Chichester Festival, arrived on the scene – and into Andrew's life. Evolution followed swiftly. Shape, substance, structure were honed. Professionals in the form of actors and singers came north from London. The number of performances per run grew and grew – from six in 1996 to seventeen this year.

Each year there is a different theme (past revues have revolved around money, the law, difficult women, the gene pool, food) but each year the theme is boy/girl, naughty but nice. Innuendo is integral. This year the title is 'Heavenly Bodies'. Much of the music is provided by





'BEST OF ALL,' REMEMBERS STUART, 'WAS 'RINGLET': THE COMPLETE RING CYCLE PERFORMED IN FIVE MINUTES AND 30 SECONDS.'



Top: In full flow. Above:Follies and fans. Inset above: Fish and chips Follies' style. Below: The perfect setting.



Stuart Barr, musical director for the last six years. 'Helen, Lofty, Stuart and I find most of the material,' says Andrew. 'The first thing we do is to think of a title – and we always like it to be mildly saucy.' They then spend nine months reading and looking for relevant material. No mean achievement when it has to be fitted into an extremely busy business life building houses in Wales, running weddings and corporate events at Fingask and looking after their three young children under seven.

Every year the Follies incorporates a potted version of some opera or another, adapted into a farce by the wit and composition of songwriter Chris Wortley. 'Best of all,' remembers Stuart, 'was 'Ringlet': the complete Ring Cycle performed in five minutes and 30 seconds.'

Members of the cast come and go year by year according to other commitments. Key to the success of the whole of the Follies, however, is Helen Threipland. Mother of three, all of whom have been born during her time as director, chatelaine of the delightfully chaotic and rambling Fingask Castle, Helen bestows calm and efficiency all round in a trail of cuddly animals, children's books and lemon polenta cake. Tall and with an haute-bo glamour, she can be spotted at every performance, checking, checking, checking.

Moving from one 'stage' to another in quick succession in the three week tour involves myriad changes: different exits and entrances, different acoustics, different pianos (one show had to be transcribed to a different pitch at the last minute, to accomodate a baroque piano).

No run is without its little dramas. Andrew remembers a night when the cook at one house expecting 87 for a sit-down dinner collapsed with severe alcohol poisoning and was carted off by ambulance down the drive as the cast came up it; and another where a man came over all queer and nearly had a heart attack after a singer sat on his lap. His wife had to lead him away home.

Six years ago the Fingask Follies were set up as a charity. Kind donations by patrons help them keep going and the rest of their expenses are covered through tickets sales. This makes the Follies one of the most successful entertainment charities in Scotland. 'We aim to wash our faces,' says Andrew, 'and usually succeed, more or less.'

At Fingask there is a large mural on the first floor landing for which Follies supporters are invited to pay to have themselves – or their dog or cat – painted. It is the only known subscription picture going in Britain. In days past, groups of like-minded people would subscribe money for a good cause and have themselves commemorated by a picture, with etchings going to all the subscribers. Rembrandt's 'Night Watch' is the most famous subscription picture of them all. 'Instead of getting etchings to take home, Follies supporters are given a copy of their portrait to take home,' says Andrew. SF

FIELDFACTS
This year the Follies start on 16th May at Fingask Castle and run until 7th June when they finish in Hertfordshire. Details of performances and bookings can be found on their website: www.fingaskcastle.com