



THE ARTS



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Fire & Light

I'm looking this month at Fire and Light and their use in great public performances. People love a spectacle, and fire, light and water bring some kind of special magic to any performance. Since the Chinese invented firecrackers and fireworks the world uses them to celebrate big events. Milton Keynes annual firework display in Campbell park is unbelievably in its 39th year and is the city's longest fire tradition by far, but we have a growing roster of memorable events that are steadily building a tradition. Here's the recent history...

Illuminated Boat Parade at Foxton 2016, ctsy Canal & River Trust

Light Fantastic 2007

My own experience of spectacle in MK goes back to 2007 when Light Fantastic brought in the amazing Transe Express. Transe Express was founded in 1982 by sculptor Gilles Rhode and choreographer Brigitte Burdin and memorably performed at the opening of the 1992 Albertville Winter Olympics. In 2007 they came to MK and amazed the crowd outside Marks and Spencers. I was never sure quite how Mark Harrison and Tony Longstaff put on this show and I always thereafter felt the the city should have been more grateful.

Fire Gardens 2010

Three years later the city's taste for the spectacular was again indulged. Compagnie Carabosse, based at the old dairy in the village of Saint-Christophe-sur-Roc in the west of France, is famous for its fire-based installations. Run as an artistic collective by Nadine Guinefoleau, Christophe Prenville, Jean-Marie Proust and a team of collaborators, they have brought extraordinary passion to their spectacular shows. Their 'Installations de Feu' are their permanent research laboratory, taking them to collaborations around the world: Vietnam, Mali, Burkina Faso, Australia, Mexico and others, bringing a rich diversity of cultural influence. In 2010 they brought their amazing creativity to the fledgling MK International Festival in its first year, with what for me is the single most impressive show I've seen in MK: Fire Gardens in Campbell Park. Heat, light and music (and any health and safety officers worst nightmare).

Two thousand people saw the first night: thereafter the event was completely sold out as word got around.

Fous de Bassin 2014

In 2014 Ilotopie brought another great spectacle, again to the MK International Festival. Fous de Bassin (Water Fools) is an unforgettable performance on a grand scale. The surreal combination of zaniness, light and fire, sound and eccentric props was a treat, only marred in my experience by the driving rain – an existential challenge for outdoor arts. Ilotopie was formed in 1980 and now lists over 40 members under the art direction of Bruno Schnebelin. Based in Port St Louis on the Rhone, Ilotopie occupy an eccentric building called The Yellow Lemon which they built in 1992. In 2005 it was designated the Centre National des Arts de la Rue, now occupied by several street art companies besides Ilotopie. This gives them a curious resonance with the early MK Development Corporation who in the 1970s occupied a large Yellow Box as their main workplace.

Clash of Drums 2015

The tradition was extended in October 2015 with Clash of Drums, a cultural treat that came with the Rugby World Cup. This was a joint drum and firework battle between Toulouse-based performance group Les Commandos Percu formed in 1994 and Basque group Deabru Beltzak started in 1996. It takes a couple of decades to get this good

in a very specialised field. Clash of Drums delivered not only some stunning competitive drumming, but also quite the longest firework show it has been my good fortune to see, much with hand-help pyrotechnics. The show depicted between Campbell Park and Xscape a symbolic collision between two tribes, combining sound, colour, light, fury and surprise.

Voalá in 2016

In 2016 IF again excelled themselves with another great night-time aerial show, this time Station from spanish company Voalá Project, led by Roberto Strada, the director and creator of Voalá's Station. Station started at dusk and went into darkness, with a fabulous narrative taking shape far above us.

Feast of Fire 17

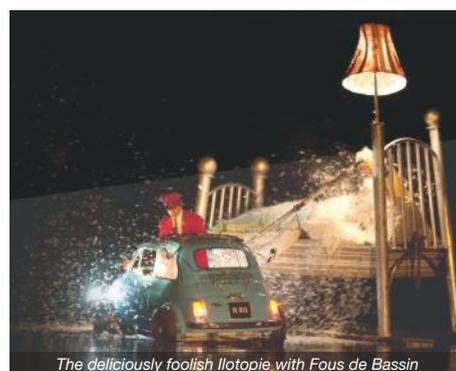
And then just before this *MK Pulse* goes to print (but after my submission deadline), MK50 is heralded by another fire and spectacle event, Feast of Fire in October 2017. The event is put together for MKIF by Walk the Plank, an outdoor arts collective formed in 1991 by John Wassell and Liz Pugh around a former Norwegian ferry MV Fitzcarraldo, but the company is now based on dry land in Salford. It promises a dizzying collection of street art, dance, music and fireworks to grace a special 50th birthday. It also features locally-grown specialists from Festive Road, Mótus and Pagrav Dance. Hopefully many of you will have experienced it by the time you read this. Not (yet) having seen it, I can only imagine...



Light Fantastic from Transe Express, ctsy Kevin Taverner



Fire Gardens from Compagnie Carabosse, ctsy C Carabosse



The deliciously foolish Ilotopie with Fous de Bassin

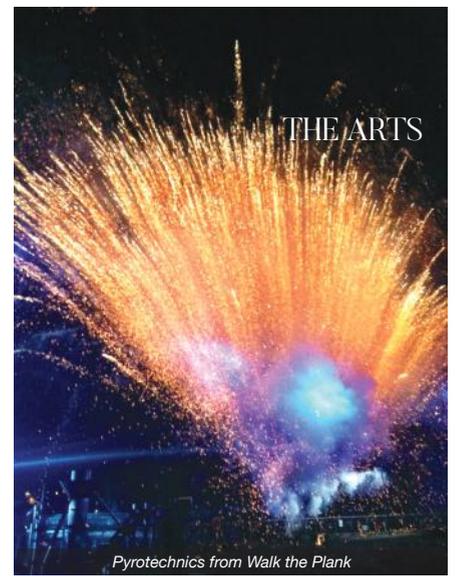




Danbor Talka: Commandos Percu and Deabru Beltza



Voalá Project, ctsy Jacob Halun



Pyrotechnics from Walk the Plank

Paraffinalia

For three years from 2014 local street arts creative company Festive Road have presented their site-specific Midwinter Fire Festival in Campbell Park, Paraffinalia. The event celebrates the darkest of days with fire spectacles, processional lanterns, pyrotechnic effects and live performances, drawing on the traditions of The Lord of Mis-rule. The show includes the Festive Road menagerie of extraordinary walkabout characters supported by a parade of lanterns and illuminated structures, and features fire performers, traditional re-enactment and live music. Sadly, with so much happening in the MK50 birthday year, I suspect Paraffinalia may be having a year off in 2017.

Wolverton Lantern Festival

On 25th November we see the return of MK's second longest-running night-time spectacle, Wolverton Lantern Festival, now in its 29th year. In 1988 as part of Wolverton's 150th anniversary celebrations, Inter-Action organised lantern-making workshops with residents in Wolverton and New Bradwell creating their own tissue and waxy lanterns lit by candles that were paraded to Wolverton Park. Local Wolverton residents loved the event so much that a year later they held the first of their own annual lantern festivals in December. Since then it has become a staple, with people across the community preparing lanterns, samba bands, craft stalls and fund-raising to make it happen. It's an exemplary community



Amazing creatures from Wolverton Lantern Festival

arts project, aiming to 'bring a bit of winter magic to the streets of Wolverton and share a joyous occasion with the good people of the town'.

Fenny Poppers

Any review of fireworks and fire cracker celebrations in MK would be incomplete without reference to the remarkable Fenny Poppers, which have been exciting crowds since they were first ignited in the 19th century. I don't believe they've had an unbroken run since then, and I'm bound to say what they lack in spectacle they make up in historical significance. But they still ring out over Fenny each August and deserve their place in the list.

November displays

MK's longest-running, if a little more conventional, firework spectacular takes place in Campbell Park every November, this year on Sunday 5th. Now in its astonishing 39th year since being started in 1978 by Keith Emmett and Tod Cody, it is made possible through a collaboration with Keith Emmett and Sons, international funfair operators based in Cosgrove.

Hundreds of thousands, probably including all of you *MK Pulse* readers, have seen it at one time or other. And as is the British tradition, towns, parishes, schools, pubs and community organisations all over MK put on an amazing range of displays over the Guy Fawkes weekends. Stony Stratford has for many years had a lantern festival supporting their Christmas lights for many years, also sponsored by Keith Emmett and Sons. This year that takes place on

2nd December, and features the famous Emmett Fairground Organ, one of the very few events anywhere in the country to regularly showcase this.

Coming up: Illuminated Boats

This year there's a new delight on the calendar, courtesy of the Canal & River Trust who look after the nation's canal network from their offices above CMK station. The Grand Union Canal in MK has always felt a bit of a poor relation compared to the big parks and lakes of the city. CRT plan to change this with this year's free MK Illuminated Boat Parade. Two years ago they trialed this in Stoke Bruerne, with 5,000 people turning up and filling the car parks. Last year was the turn of Foxton in Leicestershire, where they had to close the car parks once 8,000 people had got to the event. This year MK is to host the free event. The first 5,000 tickets were snapped up within 24 hours when they were released online last month; more will be coming. Safety is important, given the presence of boats, water, darkness and children. Even if you don't have tickets, you should be able to watch from a distance: two flotillas will converge on Campbell Park, from Wolverton Secret Garden and from MK Marina, with great viewing opportunities from the bridges along the route.

Conclusions

The main conclusions from all this are that people love a light show, especially with bangs; MK people are no different in that respect to people everywhere; and there's no shortage of excitement in our year-round cultural calendar. We bring in some great outsiders, and we generate our own home-grown events besides. As MK50 draws to a conclusion we'll all have one heck of a party! ■



NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

This year we've had our busiest summer ever. The first MK Litfest went really well in September, covered in the September *MK Pulse*. It seems likely we'll be doing it again in 2018 and shortly drawing up a proposal for funding. If you'd like to help us with Litfest, email me to log your interest.

MK Arts Week, covered in October's *MK Pulse* started very well with Festival of Nations. Slightly lower numbers this year were made up by over 200 visiting Arts Central's own Art Fair during the week, not to mention 120 other exhibiting artists. The MK Arts Week programme of workshops and performances were well received, especially the Film evening at MK11, the Dance day at Kings Centre and the Art in Motion performances at Arts Central. We got about. I shall be canvassing for a core of volunteer

organisers to make 2018 happen: no helpers, no Arts Week. Let me know if you're interested.

Arts Central shows Naomi Johnson's exhibition of bird and animal portraiture from October 28th up to Christmas. AC at Cornerstone Gallery has photographs by Anthony Young from mid-October, followed by paintings from Sonia Bacchus and her children's classes, from November 3rd. Finally, advanced warning of our Christmas Mingle and Annual Public Meeting, taking place at Arts Central on 14th December.



Art from Sonia Bacchus' childrens classes, this by Emily

To find out more, you can sign up on www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call us on 01908 241122