

Countdown to ArtsFest 2011 (17th – 25th September)

In a series of interviews, Anthea Simmons uncovers some of the fascinating 'back stories' behind a selection of artists participating in ArtsFest.

First up this year is photographer, Maisie Hill (www.maisiehill.co.uk). Maisie is a familiar figure round Lyme and some readers may well have been photographed by her in her capacity as official photographer at many of Lyme's events and festivals! She lives in the centre of Lyme and has recently built a lovely wooden studio in her garden, where this interview took place.

What is the history of your involvement in the Arts?

'I come from a very artistic family. Portrait painters, interior designers, set designers, poets, journalists...no photographers, though! Actually, after a childhood spent going to private views, I made a real attempt to escape the art scene and went to Liverpool University to read Zoology. But it was a failed attempt...about a year into my degree, I started taking photos and that was it. I was drawn to photos as a medium because they can be shared. They can be given as gifts. They are interactive; a way of recording memories and lives.

I think having children, back here in Lyme, made me even more certain that photography was the thing for me. As soon as I was able, I started a business. I had a dark room in the house and went on a three year course (trained by Ron Frampton) at the end of which I emerged with a Licentiate of the Royal Photographic Society.

I just love the variety afforded by photography. It covers so many genres and my own work spans the full range of subject matter from family portraits to the jelly shoes image which won the Evolver cover prize in 2004. I enjoy commissions because they push me into places I might not normally go. I enjoy responding to people and I like the whole collaborative aspect. I am not interested in conveying any burning message. I want to respond to what is there, to capture what is visually strong from what's around me...whatever's beautiful right here, right now, from where I am sitting.

I'm calling myself an artist less and less these days. I am a photographer.

Your equipment must be very important to you..and it's constantly evolving!

Yes, I really have to keep up to speed with the technology and it is really important to know your camera really well. You have to know exactly what it is capable of. I have five or six cameras I use regularly. They all give me something different. I still use film, actually. It really slows you down. You have to look, I mean really look. Digital images just don't have the same richness as film and I do worry about their 'shelf-life'. We really don't know how long they

will last and then there's the whole issue of technological obsolescence. Film has an integrity to it and that's why I use it for personal projects.

Whom do you admire or draw inspiration from?

Well..Cartier-Bresson, naturally. I think most photographers would cite him. I have seen his work many times in London in exhibitions. I never get tired of it. I am also a fan of Martin Parr, the photographer and photojournalist, who takes a critical look through his lens at ordinary provincial and suburban life in Britain.

And which gallery would you like to be locked up in for a weekend?

Hmmm. I think I would like to be at the International Photography Festival in Arles, France. Actually , i would be quite happy to be left alone with a heap of books! That's another great thing about photography - it works really well in books. I'd like the complete works of Cartier-Bresson.

What has been your most difficult assignment to date?

It's really hard to photograph dance performances, not least because of the low lighting and the movement. That's really challenging.

I am working on an intriguing project at the moment. Hands and tools. Artisans and makers' hands and their equipment. I have done a waxwork maker from Madame Tussaud's, a Japanese textile maker, a hooper – who trims cows' hooves...fascinating.

What's the story of your involvement in ArtsFest?

I've been involved since the start. I've either had an open studio or run workshops or both. I ran a photography competition and a scrapbook-making workshop, for example. This year I am doing a drop-in workshop for teenagers to take Facebook portraits. I'll have a huge backdrop of white paper and the kids can just take a picture and go or stay longer and get some real guidance. I would also like to post really big portraits of the members of the Youth Theatre round the town. That would be really exciting and look fantastic.

What are the strengths of ArtsFest in your view?

I think it is wonderful that the arts community in a small town like Lyme can work together and put on a show that demonstrates such a breadth of creative talent in a range of media. If I could add anything extra to the mix, I'd really like to see more street theatre as I just find it so exciting and it creates an extra buzz.

I am proud to be involved in ArtsFest because there really is a rich variety on offer. It's a great event.