

Women

The mother of all festivals

The Women's Arts International Festival boasts one of the best line-ups of the summer, and Ladyfests are multiplying. What's behind this boom in female-only arts events, asks **Ruth Allan**

When Linda Graham and her colleagues set out to showcase the most interesting work in the arts, they quickly began to realise that "more and more was being produced by women", and decided to turn this into a specific selling point.

The result is next month's Women's Arts International Festival (WAIF), being held in Kendal and featuring one of the best line-ups of all this summer's festivals. It includes performances from Marianne Faithfull and Patti Smith (as well as newer acts like Bat For Lashes and Joan As Police Woman); spoken-word events with writers Ali Smith, Germaine Greer, Michele Hanson and Jackie Kay; and stand-up acts by Jo Brand and Shappi Khorsandi. The Guerrilla Girls are performing a show that highlights their many years as anonymous artworld activists, fighting against sexism, and there's also an event with Stella Vine, whose portrait of Princess Diana, blood dripping from her mouth, created headlines a few years back.

WAIF is not the only recent festival to be dedicated to women's art. The past few months have seen a number of such events, including the annual Spit-Lit literature festival (which takes its name from its Spitalfields home) and the Birds Eye View film festival,

which is also London-based. There have been two recent "Ladyfests" – DIY women's festivals with a specifically feminist ethos – one in Cambridge last month, and one in Leeds this week (which runs up until April 15). More Ladyfests are in the pipeline (the festivals started in Olympia, Washington in 2000 and have taken place across the globe) with one planned for London next year.

Despite the success of these events though, questions persist as to whether women-only festivals – and, indeed, arts prizes, such as the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction – are really necessary. After all, both the Man Booker Prize and the Turner Prize were won by women in 2006 – by Kiran Desai and Tomma Abts, respectively.

Graham admits that the first question everyone asks her is why she's putting on a festival of women's work. Her stock response is "you wouldn't ask a jazz festival why they're putting on jazz, would you?", reflecting her belief that the festival is a chance to explore whether there are certain themes and concerns that unite women's art. "We are interested in whether there is a universal female culture," says Graham, and "it's only when you can see women's work across all the art forms that you can maybe debate that idea."

The festival's other goal – and the one more usually cited when it comes to women-only art events – is to bring women artists more exposure and a leg-up into the mainstream. Spit-Lit director Maggie

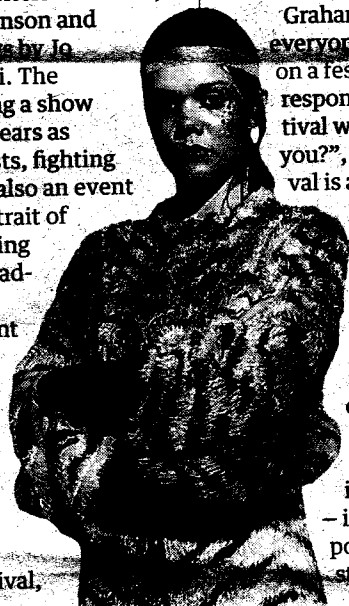
Pinhorn points out, for instance, that writers like the multi-award-winning Sarah Waters (Tipping the Velvet fame), have reached wider audiences thanks, in part, to exposure at the festival.

This remains important, because no matter how much we paint, write, and sing – and babysit each other's kids to provide some much-needed creative space – women are so painfully under-represented in the arts.

In 2003, a report by the Arts Council revealed that only 35% of people in creative jobs are women, and, in recent weeks, it has emerged that just 7% of the Tate Modern's collection is by women. The Musicians Union has about 24,500 male members – but only 8,500 female members. And although celebrity authors such as Zadie Smith and JK Rowling are doing well, literature remains a somewhat bleak terrain.

Desai may have won the Man Booker Prize last year, but she was the first woman to do so since Margaret Atwood in 2000, and, of the 40 winners since the prize's inception, less than a third have been women. Equally, while Abts triumphed in the Turner Prize, there has not been a female winner for almost a decade – since Gillian Wearing in 1997. In fact, only three of the Turner Prize's 22 winners have been women.

Given these figures, perhaps the question shouldn't be why people are running women's festivals, but why there aren't more of them. As Lizzy Guinness, one of the organisers of Ladyfest Leeds, says nationwide there's now "more than one festival every day of the year, and so the percentage of events devoted to women is tiny, really".



Left, Bat For Lashes singer Natasha Khan; below, Linda Graham of WAIF and comedian Shappi Khorsandi



Still, those that do exist seem to be punching above their weight.

Rachel Millward started the Birds Eye View Film Festival – which showcases women filmmakers – after she began making independent films with a friend and “realised that we had no female role models to look up to. We’re just so far away from the 50:50 employment situation that it’s untrue,” she notes. “Just 7% of film directors and 12% of screen writers are women, and that, I think, is reason enough to have a positive platform for the creative work of women.”

Birds Eye View has proved hugely successful – moving from a cottage operation to a sprawling showcase in less than five years – and its supporters now include the actor Thandie Newton and directors like Mike Figgis and Anthony Minghella. Even given the festival’s growth and reach though, Millward is quick to point out that women-only festivals and prizes are only part of the solution for women in the arts.

“If we can work out a way of juggling child-rearing with directing films, and deal with all the challenges that women tend to face . . . then that’ll be a revolution,” she says. “It’s very complicated, but by [running the festival] we create a forum where these issues can be

explored and challenged . . . as well as people having a good time.”

Interestingly, many of the organisers that I spoke to, including Millward, shied away from describing their events as feminist. “There are a lot of pitfalls that you don’t want to fall into,” Millward told me, “and the women’s movement has such a varied reputation that people can stop listening straight away.”

Linda Graham from WAIF takes a similar tack. “Looking at other women’s festivals around the world, just about all of them have a political agenda,” she says. “They are organised by a feminist group or an activist group . . . we thought that this was the first time that we could produce a festival like this – a multi art-form festival – that didn’t have an overtly political agenda, where we weren’t there to beat the drum and make a stand.”

Simply in creating a women-only festival though, she, and other organisers do, in fact, seem to be making a stand – and potentially a hugely positive one ●



PHOTOGRAPHS ERIC WH. . . HEAD: AFP

Women’s Arts International Festival at the Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal, Cumbria, from May 4-24
www.womensartsinternational.co.uk