

behind the news

The Edinburgh Fringe Festival might seem like the most unlikely of places to inspire an IT writer, but Munir Kotadia reports that this year technology has been taking centre stage at the theatre

Over the years the Edinburgh Fringe Festival has grown to be bigger than Microsoft Office. Apparently to see all the performances back-to-back would take about four years without eating, sleeping or drinking. The largest venue is the 5,000-seat Royal Highland Centre, while the smallest is a 2m² lift, which takes audience participation to a new high, or low, depending on which direction you're travelling.

You could be forgiven for thinking that there is no connection between the ethereal realm of fringe performing arts and the hard world of technology, but you'd be wrong. A trip to August's annual festival revealed the extent to which technology has become the muse for imaginative theatre.

Technology to die for...

After much flicking through the enormous guide book, two plays finally took our technological fancy: *Malice in Wonderland*, by The Changeling (www.changeling.com) and *Windows*, by Inch High Theatre (www.angelfire.com/clone/inchhigh).

In *Windows*, three people living alone in Glasgow find that technology has taken over their lives – literally. In one house, a wise-cracking PC refuses to send

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emails because it's too busy plotting the destruction of humanity. Between impersonations of actor Robert De Niro and HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the desktop computer reveals it has recruited the help of obsolete betamax videos and Atari games consoles to help with its evil plan.

Such a malicious device had to be a Gates-powered PC. If, on the other hand, it had been a Mac, it would be drawing up plans for a utopian commune with the pot plant in the attic.

Next door, a landline telephone is jealous of its owner's new mobile phone and turns to blackmail to get some attention. Meanwhile, an ignored

pager, drunk on its own battery fluid, tries to help its depressed master get over his ex-girlfriend.

Mad chatter

On the darker side, *Malice in Wonderland* tells the story of three naïve teenagers who meet, have relationships and then break up in an internet chatroom. It's very cleverly done with the characters speaking to the audience, while also sending private messages to each other which reveal their actual feelings. One teenager makes up stories about a recently demised girlfriend to gain sympathy, with the intention of luring someone into a real meeting.

The writers of *Malice in Wonderland* admit to being regular chatroom users, but they wouldn't say if the play is based on real-life events. If you want to see it, there will be another chance in October at the Brook Theatre in Chatham, Kent.

Perhaps now that technology has filtered down into the consciousness of the artistic world, we can all throw off our anoraks and embrace computers as cool.

Then again, if theatre at the Edinburgh Festival is anything to go by, gadgets are still the bad guys and chatrooms are creepy cauldrons of deceit. Looks like art's doing a good job of reflecting life. ■

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