

ROBERT THOMSON meets two kenspeckle thespians who just want to join in the fun

Fringe foray that is no cop out



SO IT'S been more than 20 years since you dominated the television schedules, yet you're still instantly recognisable – waistlines and laughter lines notwithstanding. So what do you do? The odd television cameo? An easy run of a popular farce in a provisionally rep? James Ellis of *Z Cars* fame would seem to have other ideas.

How about attending sci-fi conventions and surfing the plethora of websites in your honour? *Blake's Seven*'s Jacqueline Pearce would seem to require livelier stimulation.

Well what about joining the madness that is the *Fringe*? – and we're not meaning a sojourn at the Lyceum here. (Ellis has already done that, albeit in 1958 in Tyrone Guthrie's *The Bonfire*).

We're talking about putting yourself up in front of the 1500 critics, the average audience of four, and at the same time adopting, to various degrees, the roles of writer, producer, promoter, and mentor. "It's called putting something back," says Ellis. "For the danger, the adrenalin," says Pearce. Well it had to be something, that's for sure.

Their motivations may vary, their productions are markedly different, but in many ways Ellis and Pearce have similar roles this festival. She plays an actress opening up, he's a gunman hiding out,

both have made their shows happen. It's a self-empowerment kind of thing. It's also possibly that seventies retro thang. He, of course, was the good cop: *Z-Car*'s Bert Lynch, the most famous Irishman after Georgie Best for a good part of the sixties and seventies. She was the bad cop (Blake and his cohorts were escaped convicts don't forget), the evil Servalan, who went the way of all sci-fi icons, into cultdom. So what are they doing in Edinburgh, 20-odd years on.

"I didn't want to miss out on a party," says Ellis. "Having done all the real spade-work, I felt that part of the glory was coming to Edinburgh, part of the fun, part of the camaraderie. It was the climax of the thing."

The spade-work he refers to is the London run of Paul Sellar's play *The Bedsit*, in which he plays a retired terrorist, trying to live a quiet life, tracked down finally by a new generation of gunmen. It is a tense, multi-layered piece, part lament, part thriller, with Ellis capturing both world-weariness and coiled spring. Sellar sent him the script, knowing that he was a supporter of new writing and "a good fixer of plays and scripts".

Ellis agreed to perform in it – attracted to both the character and language – though only if it could fit round television commitments and take place, for convenience

sake, in his local pub. It was a huge hit, though not everyone got the point. One national newspaper ran a "so it's come to this" story, something that still rankles with Ellis and part of his reason for bringing the production to Edinburgh. He is keen to show that his faith in the writer was justified, as he says "to have the feeling that your own judgment has been endorsed by people who are in a position to further his career".

"I was very fortunate. I went into a great theatre in Belfast with a lot of older actors, a whole generation ahead of me who were anxious to pass on their skills, to teach you your trade, to

see you grow. And it's my turn now as I get a bit more senior. I love it." Ellis has also turned his hand to writing, with a book of verse just published. The haunting poem that his character Brady recites in the play is actually penned by himself.

PEARCE has gone one step further, of course, and co-written her whole show, *A Star is Torn*. It is about her, after all, a highly theatrical journey through her adventures and misadventures since the end of *Blake's Seven*.

"As an actor you're too depen-

dent on other people to employ you," she explains. "If you're in a play it's really up to the director. Sometimes I feel like a puppet. After doing *Shirley Valentine*, which is such a powerful piece, and so brilliantly written, and on my own, I liked the feeling of self-reliance and I wanted to push that further, and I think that's how this came about. I wanted to do something I'd never done before and see if I could." In the play, she relates a story about the time she took a friend to dinner at the Cafe Royal in London, ordered the most expensive things on the menu, bottles of Dom Perignon, knowing all the time she did not

have a penny to pay for it. How she got out of the predicament, and how she lost all her money in the first place, are best left told by her - lunchtimes, Gilded Balloon and all that - but it does go some way to explaining why she would attempt a one-woman show at the Fringe. "It's like bungee jumping off Niagara Falls," she adds, "It's dangerous so it's exhilarating."

Pearce and the show's director, Spencer Butler, have set up their own production company, Madame and Butler, with plans that include publishing the autobiography, developing the production into a play like *Shirley Valentine*, which

can be performed by other actresses, and writing something new, this time about someone else. Ellis, meanwhile is waiting for another window in his television commitments, for a play by a young Irish writer he's keen to produce.

"I'm sure some of the jesters and clowns wrote bits of Shakespeare's plays," he says. "He wrote that advice to the players, 'Let the clowns say no more' because some of them went over the top and started doing too much. But I would reckon that when one of Shakespeare's clowns got on the stage, they'd get on there and it might be a job getting them off." Indeed.