



Manchester International Festival has challenged detractors who say it's just for luvvies to come along and see that there is something for everyone. **Karen Connolly** and her son, Finn, took a look at a free family spectacular as did **Paul Ogden** and his children

Discovering adventure within the great indoors



» **WHAT A BLAST** Finn Connolly show his delight after landing on the squishy yellow musical cushions known as pneumaphones

EVERYTHING was happening under one roof. And with summer in this country usually meaning rain, the Great Indoors is a smashing idea.

Yet when Finn and I visited at the weekend, the great outdoors was warm, sunny and rather lovely.

But not to worry, it was all going on in the town hall and with a cornucopia of wonderful shows, music, exhibitions and inter-active events, it seemed a perfect way to pass an afternoon.

And seeing as it was aimed at 3-11 year-olds, my eight-year-old son was 'well up for it'.

The Great Indoors featured 19 artists and companies from across Europe and the UK all set in the stunning surroundings of Manchester Town Hall.

And the added bonus was it was all free.

There were also plenty of opportunities for kids to get involved in all the action.

We arrived armed with our 'What's on...' guide and headed straight for the pneumaphones which were positioned in the Lord Mayor's Parlour.

For those not familiar with pneumaphones – is anyone? – they are a collection of inflatable musical cushions from Belgium that, when leapt on by a small child, emit a rather loud trumpeting sound.

I'm sure the portraits of dignitaries past and present hanging on the walls of the parlour wouldn't have known what to make of it all.

My son didn't need any encouragement to have a go.

Shoes off, he spied his pneumaphone, took a running jump and soared through the air, landing on the squishy yellow musical cushion.

Considering the parlour was bursting with cushions, Nurofen for the parents would have been a welcome extra. The noise was terrific but the kids were having a great time.

Once Finn had reached the point of no return – red-faced and sweat-laced hair – I dragged him off his cushion and out into the Great Hall for a spot of bottle tree building.

We had entered Simple Wonders where kids could transform everyday materials – empty plastic bottles, scraps of paper, plastic bags and bottle tops – into, well, anything they wanted.

I think Finn felt much of this was a little young for him but he did become

somewhat involved in building a bottle tree with a cardboard tube, a dozen or so plastic bottles and a handful of rubber bands. A future Blue Peter presenter in the making perhaps.

The great thing about Simple Wonders was that everything used over the weekend would be recycled, which I suppose was a worthy lesson in itself to the kids.

I'd left the itinerary decisions to Finn and he decided he wanted to go to Mrs Boon's Cup Cake Workshop where youngsters get the chance to make, decorate and of course eat, their own artistically created cup cakes.

I'd checked out the website a couple of days earlier and it did look interesting so we were both disappointed when we discovered we couldn't get in because it was full.

I suppose what didn't help either was the rather curt official who insisted we left and didn't seem to want to tell us if and when we could come back for a later session.

So, sorry Mrs Boon, we did try to sample your wares but alas your cup cakes eluded us.

But maybe it was for the best because we might not have got to see one of the funniest shows we'd seen for a long time.

Elephants by Jon Hicks was in the Library Theatre and he had decided this was the perfect venue to world premiere his new show.

A world premiere featuring miniature toy elephants no less – elephants suspended in mid air, elephants being sawn in half and elephants performing amazing acrobatic feats with, among other things, a hammer, a roll of masking tape and Jon Hicks's hat.

Mad? Absolutely. Funny? Completely.

I suspect you may come across Mr Hicks and his elephants at various festivals around the country – if you do, I urge you to visit one of his shows. You will come away feeling much happier with the world.

So what was our overall view of the Great Indoors?

Well, there was certainly lots to see and do but both Finn and I felt much of it was for the younger children. Some might argue otherwise and perhaps some of the events we missed may have been more suitable for an eight-year-old than the ones we saw.

The shows were great and the grand finale of the Big Dance in Albert Square was a fantastic spectacle.

But the thing that made the most

'Many looked as though they were in it for the long haul – backpacks filled with packed lunches and drinks were the order of the day'

lasting impression on Finn was the Town Hall itself. He's seen it from the outside numerous times but he was in awe of its interior, saying it reminded him of Hogwarts.

Topped with composing his own sonata on a musical cushion in the Lord Mayor's Parlour, our Great Indoors was a rather grand day out. The majority of visitors, were, like us –

families with young children. And many looked as though they were in it for the long haul – backpacks filled with packed lunches and drinks were the order of the day.

However it also seemed to attract more than its fair share of arty types and to be honest I don't think it would have been on the 'to do' list of the city's shoppers and passers-by.