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A bit of a do

Ursula Martinez and Christopher Green love office parties so much, they wrote a play about one, and are convinced a little festive frivolity is good for the soul

Ursula Martinez and Christopher Green
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Until the age of 18, I spent every summer holiday in Spain in my mum's village, writes Ursula Martinez. The whole summer was a long build-up to the local fiesta held every year at the beginning of September. The entire village would participate in five days of dancing, drinking and eating. There was bullfighting, street bands, processions and fireworks. And the fiesta never really felt complete unless you "got off" with someone.

Festivals, celebrations and fiestas have existed around the world since the earliest civilisations. Today, their significance to modern cultures is as relevant as ever, whether it be a beer festival in Germany, a carnival in Italy or a tomato-throwing fiesta in Spain.

They exist because they play an important part in society and community life. They offer a sense of belonging and unity. They allow us respite from the normal rhythms of everyday life. They provide a chance to celebrate and let one's hair down and, in many festivals, finding a partner is an important part of the ritual.

Along with so many ancient traditions and customs, the notion of the local festival has been lost in this country. I'm no anthropologist, but in some ways the office party is our contemporary replacement for the local festival. It's a pretty poor alternative - it doesn't serve the whole community and it only lasts a few hours - but it's what we've got. It's our chance to celebrate, to indulge, to be naughty and, above all, it's a chance to come together.

Part of the reason we wrote a play about office parties is to do with how much we love the cliches of this bizarre social ritual, writes Christopher Green - the photocopied body parts, the cheap white wine, the nibbles, the stiff conversation, the indiscretions.

If you are moaning about having to attend your work's Christmas bash where you socialise, bond, eat, drink and have fun at your employer's expense, then I suggest you think again. This year why not make an effort to reach out across the social hierarchy, touch the hand of a stranger from a strange department over a supermarket-bought, finest quality individual tarragon and tomato quichelette and let go a little.

It is, of course, easier to be cynical and ironic with your pals in your team, get drunk too quickly, then leave to get the last tube and complain about how it's the same every year. Every culture needs its holiday moments where the normal social rules are suspended for a few hours, so they can snap back even more rigidly afterwards.

So if you refuse to subvert social convention by snogging someone from the post room, doing the macarena, and/or telling the boss where to put his bonus book token, then you are in fact damaging your chances of ever being part of the group the whole year through. You are going to be lonely, an outcast, a failure. Being naughty is your obligation. *Grab the opportunity*

What's the worst that can happen? You enjoy yourself? You talk to someone from accounts? Your boss realises that you are a human being, not merely a cog in the corporate machine?

There is a huge reliance in our culture on the importance of the individual. We are encouraged to express our uniqueness. But we forget how brilliant human beings are at being part of groups. We forget how functional we are as gangs, whether families, consumers, patients or corporations. In his brilliant book about office mentality *And Then We Came To The End* (Viking), Joshua Ferris quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson: "It is not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit - not to be reckoned one character ... but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party ..."

Office Party Xmas 2007, directed by Cal McCrystal, runs at the Barbican Pit, London, from December 12 to 29

Anyone for Elvis? Offbeat office alternatives

If your office party has become a tired formality of cold buffets and awkward Secret Santas, try a more offbeat way to celebrate. This year office interior company Maris Interiors is paying 130 of its staff to dress as Richard Branson lookalikes and fly to Miami for its Christmas event.

It's not just an exercise in self-indulgence, claims Mike Howard, chairman for the firm, which is raising money for the Rainbow Trust Children's Society at the same time. Howard says he finds the notion of a company going out for Christmas lunch a depressing one. "At Christmas there are loads of office people wearing hats and eating average food. I think Christmas office parties are so cringeworthy, but everyone is really excited about our Christmas events. It's great team-bonding too, as people talk to other staff they may not know very well."

It isn't the first time Howard's company has been involved in celebrating Christmas in an unusual way. Last year, Howard flew his employees, dressed as Elvis impersonators, to Las Vegas where they sang *Suspicious Minds* at the airport. The stunt raised £75,000 for charity.

The staff at another company, Extreme Elements (it sells gift vouchers for adventure activities) will be walking on fire and broken glass this Christmas. Duncan Wood, who works in the sales and operations department, says he is relishing the thought of hot coals under his toes. "Last year we had a standard Christmas dinner party, but I'm really excited about this - it's what the company is about: fun and being different."

Could the next Leona Lewis be unearthed at a three-day Christmas X Factor competition being run at the Hamilton site of First Direct? "There is no prize involved, it's just for fun," explains Kath Parrington, head of internal communications.

The traditional Christmas office party should be abolished, argues Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology at Lancaster University. "Let's get staff to take control of what's happening for their Christmas event, rather than management," he suggests. "I'd like to see staff voting on it. It should be a democratic process."

Karen Higginbottom

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