

Rural Touring Theatre - Proper programming



Touring to rural venues presents very specific challenges. Mark Helyar explains.

Village halls, tithe barns, disused factories & dynamic, empty spaces for making theatre. But what are the challenges of programming and creating work for non-theatre venues? Arguably there is little difference between programming for this sector and any other. The aspirations are the same - to produce quality, engaging work - as is the need to balance popular appeal with artistic integrity and financial viability.

But look at the tour schedule of any rural touring company this season and it's likely to include a wide range of venues, each with a completely different set of performance conditions: location, size, resources and audience expectation. The parameters vary considerably, but every challenge presents an opportunity for invention. A small village hall, for example, may be physically restricting, but the creative freedom it affords is limitless; give the audience a few visual and aural clues and their imaginations will do the rest. Pitching up with just four hours to transform it into a professional venue for the night is an exhilarating proposition. Everything - actors, costumes, set, lights, sound - has to fit into the touring vehicle.

I know of one director whose design brief is always very simple: the set should not require more than five trips per actor between van and venue! There's more to it than that, of course, but limitation of space - in transit and performance - is a defining factor when considering how the show looks. Composite, non-naturalistic sets tend to be the norm and casts frequently comprise two to five actors. When announced, a casting breakdown for a new production might generate much excitement. But then the actor reads it's a small-scale rural tour and their enthusiasm wanes, only to be squashed entirely by "You don't really want to be put up for that kind of work, do you?" from their agent.

Sadly, rural touring - along with Theatre in Education - is still regarded by many as theatre's poor relation, but fine as a first job out of drama school. Some actors and agents could do with a wake-up call, and, certainly, more drama schools should consider introducing a small-scale touring module to their curriculum. Rural touring is tough, specialised work, not to be taken lightly, but it can prove frustrating trying to tempt actors with age and experience out of the limelight and into a village hall. Thankfully, though, there are many who thrive on it. They revel in the humping, bumping, lifting and shifting (at least they say they do!) and get a buzz out of performing in the lap of the audience.

There is a perceived notion that rural audiences are a conservative crowd, only wanting Christmas shows and classic novel adaptations. But this is a generalised misrepresentation: they comprise a diverse mix of age, background and taste, and defy categorisation as a homogenous whole. The one thing they may have in common, however, is their village. Successfully managing this eclectic, yet corporate expectation, figures significantly on the challenge agenda. A company's relationship with a community, nurtured over time, can eventually engender a high level of trust.

Audiences may buy a ticket to see the company rather than the show because they are confident the experience will be good. This affords room for risk and experimentation in terms of style, content and design but only within certain boundaries. Strong language and scenes of a sexual nature on TV, for example, might not cause a stir in the living room but being performed live in the village hall is a different matter. One unfortunate experience can put off an audience, or promoter, for good.

A certain degree of risk will always be part of the territory but, given the financial vulnerability of the profession, companies often shy away from living as dangerously in artistic terms as they might like to. An unsuccessful tour can have an enormous knock-on effect on reputation, year-end accounts and future programming.

Looked at another way, though, companies take risks on a daily basis but rarely acknowledge the fact. This is particularly true when it comes to commissioning. The canon of new work produced by the English rural touring companies, say, over the past five years is phenomenal, totalling almost 100 commissions. Much of the work demonstrates this sector's remarkable ability to take stories of the particular - individuals, communities and events - and transform them into universally relevant discourses on contemporary life.

The confidence to experiment has grown throughout the sector in recent years, partly due to Pride of Place, the consortium of regional touring companies. As a strong corporate voice it provides solidarity, support and the opportunity to celebrate the successes of the skilled practitioners it represents. There is scope, however, for further dialogue between these rural producers, promoters and venues to increase mutual understanding and expertise. But more imperative is the wider development of a culture within the funding system, drama schools and agents that champions the rural touring sector, acknowledges its past triumphs and invests in its future.

Mark Helyar is a freelance director, writer and musician. He was Artistic Director of proteus between 1998 and 2004. His new book, 'India creates', will be published later this summer.

e: admin@emptycanvas.co.uk



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