

HOW DOES IT WORK?



Libraries of Lost Memories by Shoebox Theatre. Clayton-Jane-Photography

CHAPTER TWO: HOW DOES IT WORK?

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF RURAL TOURING?

THE TYPICAL ANNUAL RURAL TOURING PROCESS

THE BENEFITS OF RURAL TOURING

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF RURAL TOURING?

Rural touring is memorable, exceptional, exciting, ambitious and unique. It's also professional and not the poor relation of performances seen in dedicated venues such as theatres and arts centres. It's very sociable. It's about communities of people getting together, socialising in their own local venues whilst having a high quality arts experience.

"Rural touring matters because it does two things supremely well. First, it extends access to the arts to tens of thousands of people who do not otherwise see live performance from one year to the next. It also matters because it plays an important part in the social life of rural communities."

François Matarasso

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Rural touring relies on making genuine partnerships with care between village individuals (volunteers) and a professional arts coordinator (or cultural entrepreneur) usually employed by a rural touring agency. The agency is also able to reduce the financial risk to the volunteer promoter and provide professional support and advice throughout the process.

Each side of the partnership agrees to certain agreed responsibilities. For example, these might typically be along the following lines:

The Coordinator is responsible for:

- recruiting a network of volunteer/s in rural communities with an interest in building their personal and collective capacity in order to become rural arts promoters;
- sourcing a 'menu' of professional touring performances that are memorable, enjoyable, diverse, affordable and appropriate to offer to small community venues;
- agreeing a fee with the touring company and an affordable price for the promoting group to pay towards this fee;
- coordinating booking requests to make workable touring schedules;
- making formal agreements (or contracts) with both parties;
- providing advice and support throughout the process;
- offering financial support towards the cost of the show;
- providing publicity and marketing support, such as tickets, posters, fliers, press releases;
- contracting, paying and liaising with the performance companies;
- advertising through digital marketing all performances, ie via the agency's website, Facebook presence, Twitter, Instagram etc.;
- providing online ticketing systems;
- producing and widely distributing seasonal programmes;
- attending the show on the night to offer support;

- audience research and feedback evaluation process;
- paying the touring company and invoice the promoter.

Volunteer Promoters Groups are responsible for:

- choosing their preferred performances from the 'menu' in liaison with the agency coordinator;
- booking their local venue and ensuring it complies with all insurance and licensing regulations;
- planning and promoting their event locally;
- publicising and selling tickets;
- ensuring the venue is safe, accessible, warm and welcoming to the audience;
- greeting and hosting the artists on the day;
- managing the event on the day, including front of house duties;
- introducing the show, if appropriate;
- submitting box office returns and evaluation feedback on the event;
- paying the rural touring agency the agreed fee.

The Artists/Company are responsible for:

- providing the coordinator with their publicity material, e.g. background information on both the show and the company, as well as posters and flyers;
- providing a generic press release for use by the promoter;
- making the coordinator fully aware of their technical and performance requirements;
- contacting the promoter in good time to confirm arrival time, hospitality needs etc.;
- arriving on time on the day of the show;
- performing the show as contracted;
- invoicing the agency after the event.

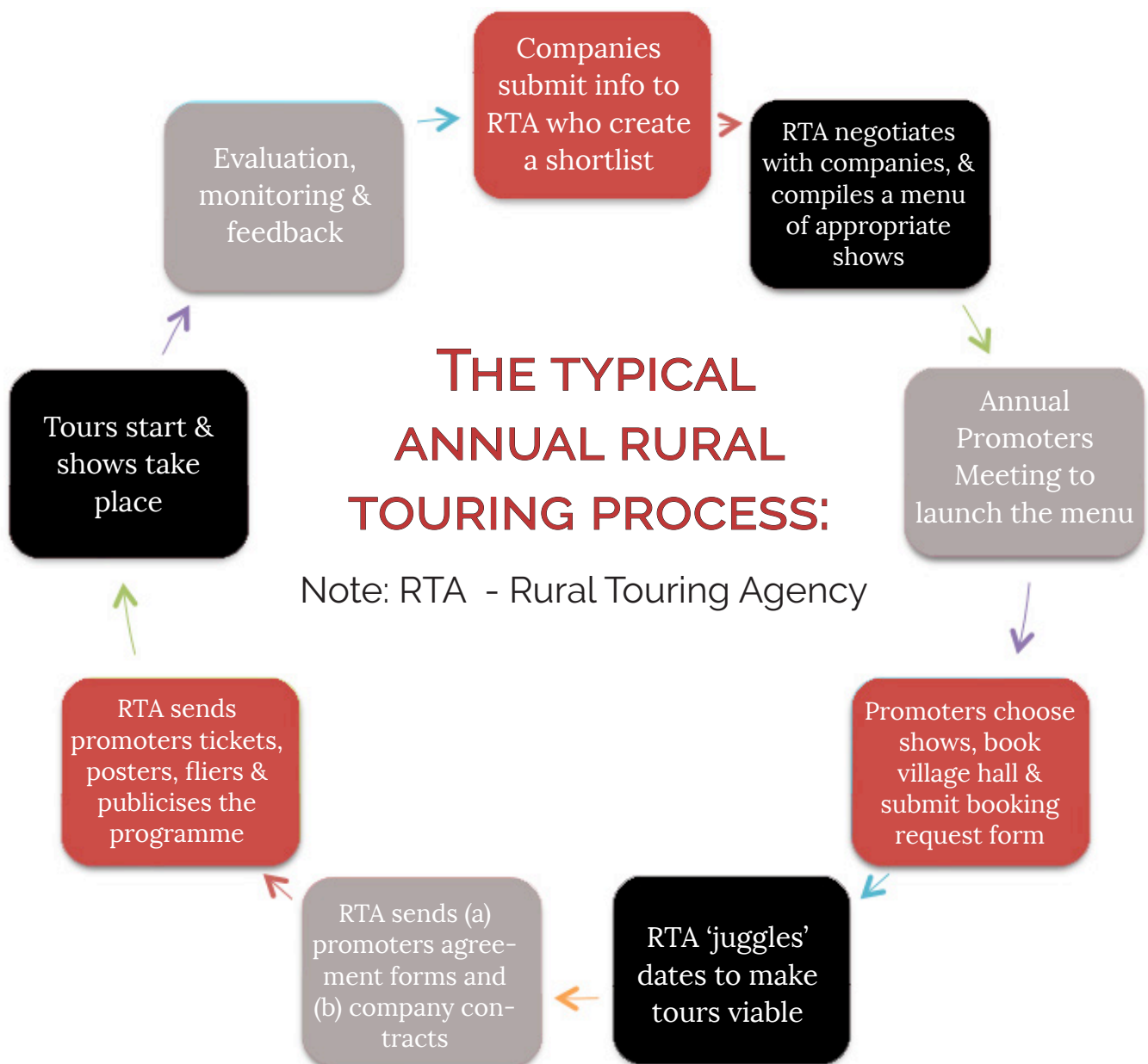
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THE TYPICAL ANNUAL RURAL TOURING PROCESS:

The typical rural touring process as shown in the flowchart below, is cyclical and well established as an effective system.

Further down in this handbook, you will find useful examples of some specific Take Art policies and strategies, such as:

- artistic policy;
- recruitment of volunteer promoters;
- methodology of selecting touring shows;
- promoter meetings;
- audience development;
- promoter training, capacity building;
- monitoring and evaluation.



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THE BENEFITS OF RURAL TOURING

From the audience perspective:

Rural touring offers audiences numerous benefits. It provides live performance as a memorable and entertaining night out for audiences of all ages and backgrounds right in the heart of their communities. Other less obvious benefits include:

- Audience development: by bringing new professional touring work to new venues;
- Increasing access to the arts;
- Increasing participation in the arts;
- Offering affordable and accessible high quality live events;
- Contributing to the local economy, increasing spending in villages;
- Attracting new visitors to the area;
- Contributing to lifelong learning and education, through participatory workshop activity;
- Developing new audiences for all art forms;
- Supporting local community development and improving quality of life;
- Supporting and sustaining local facilities and venues;
- Overcoming the lack of public transport to attend theatres in towns and cities;
- Addressing government objectives such as, social inclusion, community involvement, health and wellbeing, community safety, promoting regeneration and citizenship etc..

In 2017 we asked our audiences....
What does Take Art mean to you?

"It means everything! Drama is so important, entertaining and educational...I love it."

"Opportunities to see a range of music and theatre in intimate spaces. I have enjoyed so many great performances over the years. Thank you."

"Arts delivered in rural venues, where theatre shows might not otherwise reach." "Excellent quality performances, right on the doorstep."

"Shows are always worth a gamble. Great community events...live performances and really high quality."

From the promoter's perspective:

Most of the following are personal benefits, individual capacity building, which can lead to community cohesion and improvement of the social fabric of village life:

- Developing skills and confidence of local people in the area of arts promotion;
- Developing critical response to artists' work;
- Developing marketing and event management skills;
- Building effective teams;
- Raising money for local needs;
- Building on existing activities and skills within villages;
- Enhancing community pride and sense of place, providing a focus for the community;

From the company's perspective:

There are also important benefits from the artists and companies perspective. We asked Helen Aldrich from UK RIOTE2 partner, Broken Spectacles, the following questions.

1. What are the attributes that make up a successful rural touring company?

We have had the pleasure of touring from South Devon to John O'Groats, the entire length of Great Britain through rural touring networks. We have seen some of the most spectacular countryside and met many wonderful people.

We have broken down on busy motorways, slept by campfires on Scottish cliff tops and cooked

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our dinner at sunset by stunning Highland lochs. The show you create is of course the most important factor in guaranteeing your success but the rural touring journey ahead of you is an exciting and challenging one. You, as a company will need to be resourceful in many regards when it comes to touring. Long drives have meant endless singing sessions, concocting meals in the back of vans, turns taken driving and navigating, sometimes after sleeping in obscure wild places because we had to get a weekly ferry early the next morning to a little island to perform.

These are the joys and sometimes the challenges of rural touring. The reason our shows are successful with rural touring audiences is the tone of the performance and our engagement with the audience. We use the fourth wall of conventional theatre a little when creating images in the story-telling but there is always the possibility of stepping out and ask questions, commenting or involving an audience member. The tone is one of clowning – vulnerable, playful, joyous and potentially tragic and our heroines tell touching stories physically with live music. These are tropes that often work, but by all means push the boundaries and try some thing wildly different!

2. What is the best way of marketing your show to a rural touring agency, and then to the local promoter and audiences?

Our initial point of contact was through festivals: big and small. Rural touring agencies want to see your work before they programme it and festivals provide that platform. Ask the festival organiser for the contacts of the programmers who were at the performances and get in touch with them, ask for feedback.

Once your show has been picked up, the next step is being selected by the local promoter. What are promoters looking for? This can differ greatly but the fact a community has a say in what is programmed is great because it means disappointment is rare.

We were told by Beaford Arts, rural touring organisation in North Devon that a rural touring performance is an evening event for the community not just a piece of theatre. Our first show *Head in The Clouds* was based on the life of France's first female aviator; we added a French Musette Ball at the end with live music and suggested villages accompany the show with a French meal. The show turned into a much bigger community experience with people eating, talking and dancing together. The reasons that promoters gave for choosing this show varied wildly: *'I'm a Francophile and lived in France in my twenties'*, *'We liked the idea of providing a French meal.'* Or *'we thought the Musette Ball at the end would be fun.'*

Our second show, *At Sea* was based on the story of the selkie and a North Devon school had planned to study the selkie myth that term so we had the school children sing a 'selkie' song at the beginning of the show. This meant we had one of our biggest rural touring audiences to date with parents coming who might not have normally.

3. What will be expected of you?

Versatility. No two village halls will be the same so make sure your show is spatially adaptable. Your Green Room (backstage area) will be in unusual spaces and you will find yourself warming-up in amongst the Sunday school toys and Women's Institute cake tins. You should be happy to incorporate mishaps into the show; we had a daytime power cut where all recorded music had to be replaced on the spot by our brilliant musician on the accordion. Be available at the get-in to chat with the promoter who will probably be hosting you that evening and again, at the end with the audience who will want to meet you, tell you what they thought and ask you about your work.

4. What are the benefits of rural touring from the company's viewpoint?

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The David Hall Arts Centre. Photo credit: Nathan Sibley

Rural touring audiences have been some of our best. The proximity you have between performer and audience is exciting for everyone. Often audiences would not call themselves ‘theatre-goers’ but we’ve often found them more engaged than audiences in cities. When an audience enters a theatre they are entering the ‘sacred space’ of the performer but in a village hall the performers enter the villagers’ space and the dynamic is turned on its head. There is an exchange, a conversation, a dance between audience and performer.

“Being hosted in beautiful, far-flung parts of the country by extremely hospitable people certainly has its appeal but on top of this it has often brought moments of real artistic

exchange. One night was spent being taught old sea shanties by our Woolacombe host and his fellow choir members. Two years later, we returned with our subsequent show At Sea which I like to think was inspired by that evening spent singing around our host’s table.”

Helen Aldrich, Broken Spectacles,
RIOTE2 partner

Before setting up your rural touring agency and ‘making it all happen’, it would be advisable to ask yourself some key questions and to think about potential funding partners.

The next chapter will help to get you started.