

# CONTEXT



*Brilliance by Farnham Maltings Photo credit: Shayne Shaw, Beyond Infinity Photography*

## CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXT

### WHAT IS A RURAL TOURING NETWORK?

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### WHY CREATE ONE?

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### HOW COULD IT WORK IN HUNGARY & ROMANIA?

### WHAT IS A RURAL TOURING NETWORK?

At its simplest a rural touring network in England can be described as a series of physical spaces that are connected across a defined geographic area by a co-ordinating organisation. These spaces could be village or community halls, churches, schools, outside areas or the occasional volunteer-run rural theatre. The co-ordinating agency could be the arts department in a local government/council, an independent arts organisation, a venue, company or an individual cultural entrepreneur who has the interest and funding to develop such a network.

The agency coordinator curates a programme of professional touring arts work (ie theatre, dance, music, spoken word, circus etc.) and offers these performances to a network of carefully recruited local volunteers, with an ambition to promote high quality shows in the heart of their own communities.



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Fine Chisel Theatre. Photo credit: Paul Blake

## WHY CREATE ONE?

The touring infrastructure for performers and performance companies in rural regions in Europe might not be very well developed but this will obviously vary country to country. By touring infrastructure we mean a series of technically equipped theatres or arts spaces staffed by skilled programmers who curate and promote a programme of arts events. Such an infrastructure exists in the majority of UK towns and cities, enabling companies to take their shows on regional and national tours.

However, in UK rural areas, this inevitably means that the opportunities for performing arts companies wishing to tour can be problematic. In addition people and communities living in rural areas do not have geographic access to high quality arts events and are, therefore, culturally at a disadvantage. This is especially true if these communities do not have easy access, through good and affordable transport links, to professionally run theatre venues in their local towns and cities.

This is not fair. It is a policy issue for those government bodies that espouse a cultural

aim to provide the rural population with good access to high quality cultural activity. It means that children and young people living in those areas, the future and current audiences for the arts, are not being introduced to the wonder and imaginative delights that live performance bring. It means that a new potential audience for professional performing arts companies is being denied to them, and that the economic benefit of touring more widely is not being capitalised upon. The creation of a 'rural touring agency' can help redress this imbalance.

*"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."*

Article 27, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

To summarise: central to success is the understanding of, and commitment to, the need for rural touring. This belief has these founding principles:

- Rural audiences have a right, as much as their urban counterparts, to access a high



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- quality arts programme;
- Professional companies have a right to take their work to new, rural audiences.

The imperative that drives the development of rural touring is a willingness to collaborate which can be accompanied by a sense of isolation. The benefits of creating such networks include: greater bargaining power with artists and companies when negotiating fees; sharing of resources such as lighting and sound equipment across a network; sharing good practice, knowledge and learning; and collectively raising the profile of the network.

There is no single template for a rural touring agency, only its initial viability. It requires a minimum number of spaces to create a touring circuit, with the assumption that most shows will only be performed once in each area, as a consequence of drawing on a limited potential audience. The spaces need to be within reasonable travelling proximity to enable companies to easily travel and set up for 'one night only' performances. It also means these professional companies need to develop shows that are flexible and adaptable enough to slot into this kind of touring schedule and within these logistic constraints.

Touring agencies in one area can link with fellow organisations in other areas to create a 'network of rural touring agencies'. These might sit within a region or across a whole country or they could even straddle several countries. For example, in South West England, each regional county (Somerset, Devon, Cornwall, Dorset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire) work together under the umbrella of the SW Rural Touring Network.

From a national perspective, there is an even larger network, an umbrella body representing all the English rural touring agencies. This is the National Rural Touring Forum (NRTF). It also has membership from rural touring organisations in Scotland and Wales. These networks are explained more fully in the following chapters.

There are a number of pitfalls when developing a rural touring agency but these can be avoided if one has an understanding of the uniqueness of the rural touring culture.

## Policy:

Rural touring in England is not possible without funding support to build and underpin the infrastructure. This means making the arguments to politicians and cultural policy makers about the rationale and expressing the needs and the rights of rural communities. It also means providing them with the evidence to back up the arguments as well as proven successful models that can address the need.

## Strategy:

This is the organised, structured approach to enable rural touring to succeed and thrive. It is about setting up and supporting the practical constituent parts of rural touring: the professional coordinators, the venues and touring companies. It is about developing the components of a sustainable infrastructure.

## Local 'Buy In':

Rural touring depends significantly on local people, the volunteers, to become arts promoters. It is empowering to offer these individuals (or groups) choice over the events that will be taking place in their communities. The local volunteers will be instrumental to the success of a rural touring network. Their willingness to take on this role and build their capacity is vital and, therefore, the recruitment of the 'right' sort of person is also crucial.

It is important to note that many communities feel justly very proud of the existing cultural life in their village. They are almost bound to have regular church and school activities, perhaps local festivals and celebrations. The offer to become promoters and take part in this new rural touring model should be carefully approached. In Take Art's experience it is best to approach this as a 'complement' to the already rich and varied culture in their local community.

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This handbook focuses principally on how the English touring model has developed. It is not the only model. Others exist in France, Norway, Sweden, Wales and areas of Scotland where rural touring works differently. These are referenced in the final chapter.

## HOW COULD RURAL TOURING WORK IN HUNGARY?

In Hungary, Control has run community theatre projects in Dunaszekcső with the involvement of the local community. Its aim is to develop the theatre aspect of the Weekdays/Pictures Days Festival (Képköznepok) to realise participatory theatre projects and also to invite other theatre shows for an eventual 'barter'. The neighbouring village of Dunaszekcső is Bába and another little town in the province is Pécsvárad that they would like to connect in a small regional network. The three settlements are on the line of the Hungarian Pilgrim's Way: a special initiative to set up a Hungarian rural network following a concept of what culturally or geographically connects each location.

### In Hungary the aims are:

- to bring theatre shows to geographically disadvantaged villages. This might be villages (cities not excluded) alongside the river Danube in a North-South line. This would be a parallel way with the St. Mary Pilgrim's Way in Hungary: <http://magyarzarandokut.hu/terkep> Or alternatively to carry out a social-theatre project in the already existing local network in Borsod County: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borsod>;
- to connect those villages in a network, possibly along a common theme, such as geographical (e.g. Danube) or a cultural context (e.g. St. Mary Pilgrim's Way);
- to create a dialogue and a common journey with the local inhabitants through 'performance bartering' and participatory theatre projects;
- to give space in such a network more for independent theatre companies not excluding state theatres as well.

### With the following objectives:

- To develop the already existing relationship in three rural settlements with local inhabitants through participatory theatre projects: Bába, Dunaszekcső, Pécsvárad;
- To start building the idea and the base of a Secret-Anthropological Theatre Festival in Zsámbék (lead partner is Zsófia Rideg the dramaturge of the national theatre and the organizer of the MITEM Festival) and the Mayor of Zsámbék;
- To find a sponsor to invite other performances to the three villages and to create the context of a possible 'theatre barter' project where both local and professional performances are presented.

## HOW COULD RURAL TOURING WORK IN ROMANIA?

Shoshin has already put on theatre performances in Romanian villages. They have played or organised guest performances in culture houses, community rooms, village squares, gardens and churches. The overall reaction to them was always positive, the inhabitants were enthusiastic and curious, thanking them for the experience and wanting more. They strongly believe that in every village there is at least one person who wishes to develop more cultural activities in their settlement.

'Culture houses', most often a heritage of the communist era, can be a good foundation in terms of space for a future network. This is because almost all villages have them. Many of them have been recently renovated and are in good condition. Some are even equipped, others not. They also sometimes differ in size, but most of them are large enough for small scale productions to be held. It would be ideal for performances with a cast of up to six people. There are also the squares and church gardens. Outdoor productions with low technical needs could always be held there.

A solid and dependable financial support for



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Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo

these kinds of activities would also allow theatre makers to really look at rural touring as a viable market, and this in turn would challenge them to adapt and create more and more work which would suit the possibilities as well as the needs.

Currently there are disparate efforts of single organisations, or sometimes even just individuals. Hai in Sat Association has recently closed a programme which brought bits of opera to ten villages surrounding Cluj.

There have been efforts elsewhere as well, in the form of travelling performances: Bánsági Vándorszínház and Cultură'n Șură are examples.

So, one could say that the stage is nearly set, contacts have been made, steps have been taken, and there is an evident need from both the side of culture/theatre, as well as those living in the target areas. But it needs to be taken to the next level, otherwise the efforts will dissipate. This can be done with a joint lobby on the part of the organisations that have already taken on such work. And of course, it needs also the actual political will from those who have the power to decide about supporting such endeavours.

## In Romania, the aims would be:

- To develop a sustainable network with motivated promoters;
- To bring professional touring performances of theatre and dance (both from state theatres and independent theatres) to rural venues;
- To start a dialogue with the audience and locals.

## With the following objectives:

- To work in the Transylvanian region between the Carpathians mountain range;
- To find 5 rural settlements with 5 motivated potential promoters who are open to the idea of rural touring;
- Find out from the promoters what kind of performances these settlements would like;
- To find 10 performances which are suitable for rural touring (in terms of the theme of the performances, the genre of the performances, the number of actors, the size of the setting, etc.);
- To hold one performance in each venue in each year.