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# ONLY CONNECT:

## ARTS TOURING AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

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### **A COMEDIA REPORT FOR THE NATIONAL RURAL TOURING FORUM 2004**

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# WELCOME TO THE HOUSE OF FUN

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It's night when we arrive, and the darkness is barely relieved by a few scattered street lamps and porch lights. Luckily, the village hall is signposted from the main road; there's no-one about to ask. It isn't raining, but it has been, and everything's damp. The air is March cold; we're not many miles from the North Sea. The hall lights are ablaze, and the ubiquitous white van stands near the fire door; the musicians are here. The tiny car park is full, and cars line the muddy verges, though there's a good half hour before the show.

The hall is square and low, dark, with a pitched roof. Inside, there's a long corridor, then a turn into the main space. The box office is a card table, and one of the promoter's helpers is there to welcome us. It's the first show, but all the tickets are gone, so they're understandably thrilled, if a little anxious about how things will go. The hall itself feels like a social club, not the usual chilly 1950s space, though it's probably been here as long. There are pictures and wall-lights, and a curtained-off bar area at the far end, with benches and tables. A hundred plastic chairs are ranked in front of a shallow stage littered with mikes and music stands; keyboard, vibraphone and drum kit stand out against a startlingly white backdrop.

The room is already half-full. It's a local audience – everyone chatting and exchanging news, on first name terms, new layers being added to some very long conversations. Some people have already taken their seats, keen for a good view; they talk amongst themselves, holding pints or balancing coffee cups on their knees. There are lots of children and teenagers. Not allowed in the bar, they've colonised the first three rows, deep in discussion; a group has been put in charge of selling raffle tickets. The promoter is on the move, talking, thanking people for coming, answering questions.



Then the lights dim and a handful of spotlight beams bounce off silver stands and cymbals. A saxophonist comes centre stage, and begins a slow looping melody; the audience settles like a dog on a hearthrug. The melody builds, and then there's a pianist, adding texture to the breathy line; one or two at a time, other musicians take their places from the wings, or through the centre aisle. Soon there's barely room to move. As well as the jazz instrumentalists, there's a singer, a violinist and a cellist, and, in front, a conductor: this is the Homemade Orchestra, bringing jazz and contemporary classical music together in unexpected ways. Just how unexpected becomes clear as the saxophonist's melody, now part of a complex arrangement, mutates into the old Beatles song, 'Paperback Writer'. From that stunning opening, the Orchestra takes the audience on an unimagined interpretative journey through a 20th century songbook,

refreshing the familiar, and introducing the new. Gershwin and Ellington rub along with Peter Gabriel and the Human League, and new work by Tim Whitehead and Colin Riley.

Whatever their age or expectations, taste or experience, people respond to the music, and the virtuosity of individual players, with warmth and enthusiasm. And the musicians, unsure what to expect on the first night of the tour, respond in turn: this is a dialogue, a felt conversation with few words. The mystery of live performance is at play, drawing people in through the unmediated sound, the energy and the infectious enjoyment of the musicians – the present-ness of art experienced.



There's a palpable buzz in the hall at the interval, as people refill their glasses, exchange impressions and buy the Homemade Orchestra's CDs; the teenagers are making sure no-one has escaped the raffle tickets. There's no hurry, and the interval stretches as people stretch their legs: this is a social occasion. Then it's the second half, even stronger than the first, rousing applause, an encore that seems genuinely to please the musicians, and it's done. The music hums in the memory, reverberating inside as the raffle is drawn, people get last drinks, or talk to the performers. Slowly, the packing up starts: it's midweek, and everyone has things to do.

In a matter of hours, the Homemade Orchestra and the audience have encountered each other, shared an unrepeatable moment, and gone their ways. It's been a brief, but resonant, connection. The evening feels like a triumph on all sides: there will be more shows in this hall, and more halls for the Orchestra to connect with new audiences. The ripples will run far and long, linking people and art. This is rural touring: professional and homemade.

# REPORT SUMMARY

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## INTRODUCTION

### Rural touring

Touring schemes, connecting voluntary promoters with professional performers, have been extending access to the arts in rural Britain for almost 25 years, since the first initiatives were set up in South East Wales, Hampshire and Lincolnshire. They have grown rapidly in number and importance, especially in the past decade, and the National Rural Touring Forum (NRTF) now has over 40 members. *Only Connect* is the first large scale study of this work, commissioned by NRTF and funded by the Carnegie UK Trust, the Arts Councils of England and Wales, the Countryside Agency and several local authorities.



### The research

The study is concerned to understand how rural touring has developed, the nature of its practice, its distinctive contribution to the arts, and its impact on the communities where it works. Research was undertaken during 2003 in 8 case studies in England and one in Wales. It involved extensive interviews with promoters, residents, artists, managers and others involved in touring, sometimes focusing closely on a small number of villages, at others looking at development across a county or district. In addition to case studies, further contextual research was undertaken, including a literature review, analysis of programmes and records, research visits to other parts of the country and to France, and an audience survey to which 994 people at 27 events contributed.

The study does not include Scotland, but a parallel review of 25 years of theatre touring in that country was undertaken by the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow, and is published separately. Nor does it include other forms of touring, such as that organised directly by companies themselves, or rural arts development more widely, focusing only on the particular practice of touring schemes.

## RURALITY

### Seeing the rural landscape

Rural Britain is a landscape of the mind, as well as a place where people live, work and play. Ideas of what constitutes the country, and what values should reign there, loom large in culture and policy. They have grown in importance, in politics and the media, as a result of rapid change which some characterise as a 'countryside crisis'. This change is complex: its symptoms

include continuing decline in the domiciled agricultural workforce, growth in the rural population as a whole, shifts in farming practice, problems in food production, such as BSE and FMD, changes in the kind and availability of services and the demand for them, and many other aspects of social, economic and cultural life in rural areas. It has seen greater recognition of the complexity and, above all, the diversity of rural Britain. The residents of rural areas – between 11 million and 14 million people according to different sources – have interests, needs, tastes and backgrounds as varied as those of many urban and suburban areas. Consequently, services in rural areas, including the arts, must be equally diverse if they are to fulfil the government's stated ambition of equitable service provision in rural and urban areas.

### **Rural areas and the arts**

Although touring schemes exist to improve access to the arts in rural areas, it would be a mistake to imagine the countryside as empty of artistic opportunities. There are many artists, professional and amateur, living and working in rural areas, as well as arts organisations, touring theatre companies, and local authority arts officers; the arts also thrive in festivals, historic buildings and commercial enterprises. Touring schemes have a distinctive



place within this rural arts ecosystem, not least because of their valuable partnerships with local promoters. There is an evident growth in rural arts activity, particularly in the kind of self-directed initiatives that link communities with professional artists. Rural touring is part of this development, which is often intended by those involved to strengthen a sense of community in the face of the change just outlined.

## **RURAL AND COMMUNITY TOURING SCHEMES**

### **Rural touring schemes**

There are at least 40 rural and community touring schemes in England and Wales. Most cover counties, but some operate in smaller areas; most focus on rural districts, but some extend into urban areas, and one operates exclusive in the metropolitan West Midlands. They have different management structures, levels of resources, artistic policies and ways of working, but they are united by a belief that:

- High quality, live arts performance offers a unique, and increasingly uncommon, experience, which is life-enhancing, and sometimes life-changing;
- Rural isolation, poverty, social exclusion and similar disadvantages should not prevent people from having good access to those experiences;
- Local people are essential actors in arts development, sharing responsibilities, risks and rewards as equal partners with artists, professional bodies and funding agencies;
- The results of successful arts promotion extend widely and contribute to personal growth and strong, sustainable communities

Working with local promoters to put on performances in village halls and similar venues is the core of rural touring schemes' work, but a number are also involved in other arts development activity including workshops, artists' residencies and exhibitions.

### **Audiences, artists and promoters**

In 2002/03, rural touring schemes put on nearly 3,200 shows, attended about 220,000 people (194,500 in England and 25,500 in Wales). These events were widely dispersed across the country; although many promoters aim to put on several shows a year, limited resources often mean that there is only one or two in each village. More than 250 different companies and performers were involved. Some theatre companies performed between 30 and 50 shows, but most played far fewer nights: the median number was three. Theatre and music each made up about a third of the performances, with the rest being dance, circus, storytelling, puppetry, children's shows and other forms; there were additionally over 300 film screenings. All the shows were chosen and promoted by local people, principally village hall committees, who shared the risks and benefits of the productions. In 2002/03, there were at least 1,530 active promoting groups in England and Wales, involving an estimated 5,850 volunteers.

### **The economy of rural touring**

The collective annual turnover of the touring schemes is about £2.3 million, a third of which comes from the Arts Council, and a third from local authorities (who also make a substantial 'in kind' contribution); box office income makes up most of the rest. Touring is also supported by the huge unquantifiable but invaluable voluntary effort of promoters and others; free use of facilities and generous hospitality make further invisible contributions. All this helps keep the administrative costs of rural touring low. The partnership with local promoters is notable for strengthening the demand side of the economic equation, and partly accounts for the rapid recent expansion of rural touring, which saw the number of performances grow by 171%, and the number of active promoters by 163%, between 2000 and 2003.

## **ARTISTIC ASPECTS**

### **Access to the arts**

Rural touring should be seen as a part of mainstream arts provision, ensuring access to high-quality professional productions by people who live in rural areas. A substantial proportion of the audience does not see live arts except through the touring schemes: about a third of the audience survey respondents (34%) had not attended other events in the previous 12 months. In more remote areas, and among young and older people, this figure is much higher. For those who do see the arts elsewhere, rural touring is a valued additional opportunity, especially because of the distinctive experience it offers.



### **Diversity and choice**

Part of the artistic value of rural touring is in extending the range of work available to people living in rural areas, and especially in adding to the amateur and commercial work which is most common. It brings the best of small-scale dance, theatre and music, excellent children's performances, and work from Black, Asian and other cultures into shared community spaces,

connecting them with the mainstream of current cultural life. Many performers, particularly in music, are well-known and highly-rated; others bring forms, like physical theatre or Indian dance, under-represented in rural areas. In doing so they both affirm and challenge their audiences' values; and often find their own ideas developing in return.

### **A unique experience**

Rural touring is not a poor substitute for the kind of experience offered by urban arts venues. It is qualitatively different in several respects. The facilities may not be as good, but the intimacy of the space, the opportunity to meet the performers, the fact that most of the audience know each other – these give a village hall show a unique power. Indeed, they can make it a



more challenging experience for the audience, who often come for reasons unconnected with an interest in the arts, and for the performers, who cannot expect people to be familiar with their work. Both artists and audiences consistently feel that such shows are exciting, memorable and have a quality which is distinctively valuable.

## **COMMUNITY COHESION AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **Bringing people together**

Village hall shows have a great capacity to bring local people together and that aspiration is common among promoters. Audiences span the age range, and include many families; friendship is also important, and people feel comfortable going alone in the expectation of meeting people they know. Audiences include people who have lived in the village for a few months, a few



years or lifetimes: shows provide a space where locals and incomers meet and mingle. As a result, the shows contribute significantly to overcoming individual isolation and some of the difficulties of getting to know people in growing communities with less stable populations. They provide reasons to meet and talk for weeks of preparation beforehand and, often, for months of discussion afterwards. As arts events, they offer memorable experiences, and can provoke lasting debates, becoming part of the shared history that is a basis of community.

### **Community development**

The importance of rural touring in community development is that, rather than simply giving people access to a service, it involves them directly in all aspects of its delivery, where they live. It is less of a good provided, than a process acquired, and its impact on the community organisations involved can therefore be profound. Rural touring has often been the first step in local arts and community development initiatives, valuable because it is accessible, yet demanding. People in villages like Terrington (Yorkshire), Bergh Apton (Norfolk) and Ashbrittle (Somerset), have used touring to develop new community projects and organisations, with positive outcomes for rural cohesion and regeneration.

### **Viable villages**

Rural touring has a valuable role in a changing social and economic environment. Its contribution to community development, social capital and voluntary activity make it very relevant to the Rural White Paper's headline indicator of 'community involvement and activity', and the Countryside Agency's measures relating to 'community space, community engagement and community capacity'. It is not a panacea, but it should be part of any policy aiming to support regeneration, social inclusion and a good quality of life in rural areas.

## **THE FUTURE**

The research identifies some challenges for rural touring, including issues of village hall regulation, volunteering, and finance. It also considers the possible effects of expansion on sustainability. It records the important contribution of rural touring to artistic and community vibrancy in rural areas. It describes some characteristics on which success has been built, notably equitable partnership, a commitment to quality, the diversity of work and approach, the stability of the organisations and the availability of resources. Finally it suggests areas for further consideration by those involved, including whether there is an optimum level of activity, opportunities for schools work, and how the promoter network might be extended.



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