

Foreign Exchange: *Working internationally in the UK*

Jodi Myers

Not that long ago visits by exciting theatre and dance companies from abroad were something of a rarity. An occasional tour by a Russian ballet company performing a familiar title might bring some glamour to the programmes of larger regional venues, but in general international work tended to be concentrated in London or at festivals. Today international work is still flourishing in London and at festivals, but across the UK the situation has changed dramatically. Despite continuing challenges presented by changes in work permit legislation, concerns about carbon footprints and a tough global economic climate, there appear to be almost as many ways of working internationally as there are nations.

One person who professes to be a fan of the new work permit arrangements is Jan Ryan of UK Arts International, one of the country's most prolific promoters and co-producers of international work. In 1992, when she was working at Birmingham REP, a series of coincidences fuelled her long-standing interest in work from other cultures, leading Jan to develop a portfolio that has included touring productions of predominantly new work from South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Uganda, Haiti, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Jan talks about the need to 'look outward' and her interest in work that speaks about the place it comes from (most of the work she presents is in English). She is clear that she is not an 'importer' of work; for her it is vital to make conversations and connections happen and to extend audiences' expectations.

Jan's future projects include several shows from South Africa's category-defying *Third World Bunfight*, and she is planning further UK outings for *The Harder They Come*, a co-production with the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, with whom she has a close relationship. This show has already enjoyed successful runs in London and Toronto and at the time of writing was about to play Miami.

Dublin-based Richard Wakely of RW International Arts, like Jan, works with artists with whom he has a personal connection. He is interested in making long-term partnerships with both companies and venues, working closely with marketing and education, as well as programming staff. Richard is concerned that current economic circumstances may compromise risk taking, but suggests that limited resources may open up opportunities for lesser known but attractive companies, especially as some of them bring subsidy with them. Acknowledging that theatre in a foreign language is still often a struggle, Richard concentrates on physical theatre and dance. Sol Pico from Spain is a company he has been working with for several years, in outdoor settings or in

unconventional spaces, but now he is hoping to interest British middle- and large-scale venues in its work. As Richard thinks it is important for potential promoters to see work live, rather than on DVD, he will be inviting them to see the company in Barcelona. He believes that the presentation of international work in the UK depends on the interest of the individual who runs a theatre. This is a point echoed by Rachel Clare of Crying Out Loud, which focuses on 'circus beyond tents'. She has successfully developed relationships with a number of venues outside London, often through individuals who may move on to other jobs and take that connection with them. Rachel suggests Crying Out Loud's ability to provide stunning visual images alongside reviews from London runs, and being able to say a show is playing for example, Warwick Arts Centre or Nottingham Playhouse, are key to selling her productions widely. One of her current projects involves British artists being resident at one of the circus creation centres in France, developing work, which then will tour internationally. Putting together complex international co-production arrangements is highlighted by Julia Carruthers, Executive Director of Akram Khan Company. AKC's next production, which tours in 2010/11, will be co-produced with venues in London, Paris, Ottawa and Barcelona, and it will also be supported by Dance East and the Curve in Leicester – the latter offering significant rehearsal and production time, prior to the show opening there in September 2010.

Two consortia have played a vital role in expanding the amount and variety of international dance seen in the UK and are models of collaborative working, enabling venues to influence their programmes, reach new audiences and expand their dance programmes.

As John Stalker, Chief Executive of Festival City Theatres Trust in Edinburgh, explains, the Dance Consortium was established in 2000, bringing together a supportive network of large-scale theatres willing to take risks in presenting work new to UK audiences. The Consortium offers 2.5 tours each year, most funded by Arts Council England, but as costs rise and subsidy is squeezed, it remains to be seen if that level of productivity can be sustained. The Consortium celebrates the diversity of dance styles, choreographers and dancers. This autumn will see the return of the Mark Morris Dance Group, and next year it will present the first UK tour by Danza Contemporanea de Cuba, as well as return visits by Companhia de Dança Deborah Colker and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

In response to the need to get more interesting work into middle-scale venues, the Dance Touring Partnership (DTP) was set up in 2002. Members of the DTP travel abroad to see what is under consideration, and they are particularly interested in work that has a strong physical narrative and will be appeal to young audiences. The Partnership occasionally co-commissions work, for example last year's *James son of James*, from Ireland's Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre, in collaboration with the Barbican and Dublin Festival Theatre. This autumn it is presenting *Insane in the Brain*, Swedish company Bounce's hip-hop interpretation of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Of course individual venues, both presenting and producing, have their own reasons for engaging with international programming. In a part of the country that had received little touring prior to the opening of the Hall for Cornwall in Truro in 1997, Director Tim Brinkman points out that international work has provided a way of making contact with other places. The theatre is a member of both dance consortia, which has enabled it to support significant growth in its overall dance programme. As well as international dance, the Hall presents work for children, such as Teatro Kismet's recent tour of *The Snow Queen*, performed in Italian but with translation embedded within the play.

Based on a campus, which is home to over 200 nationalities, Warwick Arts Centre has a long-standing interest in international work, and this is now well integrated into its theatre and dance programme. As well as the benefits that exposure to international work brings to audiences, Neil Darlison, its Deputy Director, says that Warwick is conscious of the impact this can have on regionally-based artists, so it looks for opportunities to connect them with visiting artists. The importance of indigenous artists being exposed to work from other cultures is also highlighted by Nelson Fernandez, Deputy Director of Visiting Arts until last year.

Warwick presents a fair amount of foreign language theatre, such as work from Peter Brook's *Bouffes du Nord* and by Cheek by Jowl, although many people still find it a barrier. However, as an arts centre engaged with multi-disciplinary work, it has developed a strong relationship with theatre makers like James and Aurelia Thiérrée, who are not text dependent. Northern Stage also presents Cheek by Jowl's international work, and Erica Whyman, Northern Stage's Chief Executive and Artistic Director, says a foreign language isn't an issue if the story is strong enough, pointing out that local theatre-goers may not have had the opportunity to see a play such as *The Three Sisters* in English. She talks about work which builds a deep relationship and supports changes in practice and audience engagement; her company is involved in the Swallows Partnership between the North East of England and South Africa's Eastern Cape, the main aim of which is mutual development, not necessarily a shared production.

Another way of working internationally opened up for Northern Stage when Hexham-based Théâtre sans Frontières approached it about creating a project with Robert Lepage and Ex Machina from Quebec. *Lipsynch* opened in Newcastle in 2007 away from the critical glare of London and enabled the company to take onboard audience feedback. The project had a number of associated benefits – a dozen young practitioners from different disciplines based in the region were invited to observe the creative process, and a conference was set up with Newcastle University. This complex production stretched Northern Stage's technicians, but learning from Lepage's working methods, it also changed the way Northern Stage now plans its technical weeks, allowing more time for its technical team to work together. Looking ahead Northern Stage will be celebrating its 40th anniversary with a focus on 'northern-ness', working internationally but not necessarily with theatre artists, but rather with artists who work theatrically.

Across town Live Theatre, traditionally concerned with regionally connected work, now has an ongoing dialogue with the Market Theatre of Johannesburg. Jim Beirne, Live's Chief Executive, explains that this has involved their associate directors of education and new writing visiting South Africa, and their counterparts coming to Newcastle. This collaboration led to a co-production of David Harrower's *Blackbird* in 2007/8. Live is now working on a joint commission with the Market Theatre which is likely to play other UK venues, and is also developing relationships with other new writing companies based in Sydney and Chicago.

Alongside its links with North American theatres, Nottingham Playhouse is a member of the European Theatre Convention (for producing theatres) and through them has co-produced a classroom piece on immigration with Hamburg's Thalia Theater. It also regularly presents international dance. Stephanie Sirr, the Playhouse's Chief Executive, explains they are planning a European Theatre Festival in 2011, one of the features of which will be a train taking theatre companies across UK and Europe, performing new work off the train. Tony Graham, the Chief Executive and Artistic Director of Unicorn, points out that Imagine, Scotland's festival for children and young people, has been very important in introducing international work to the UK. He feels that international work should be part of the regular programme of his theatre, and he looks for productions in English or having minimum text. Soon after its new venue opened three years ago, Unicorn co-produced with Teatro delle Briciole from Parma, and the show toured to five UK venues. Unicorn has relationships with, and has presented, companies from South Africa, Holland and Japan, as well as seasons of Danish and Swedish work, but Tony is concerned about the viability of maintaining this breadth of work.

Many stress the importance of travelling abroad to see work in order to make informed choices about what to programme, and to initiate relationships that might lead to long-term collaboration. There are also numerous opportunities to participate in the various global networks, although ways of connecting the networks themselves need to be sought.

Inevitably, given that international work is usually a 'loss leader' for venues, in the current economic climate many are concerned that present levels of activity might not be sustainable in the future. There is also a feeling that the sector currently lacks champions – one such, Neil Wallace, formerly of Cardiff and Glasgow and now Holland based, is frequently mentioned as someone who was instrumental in enthusing British theatre managers about working internationally. Many believe there is an opportunity for the Arts Council to take a stronger lead in developing international policy, and to help ensure a better spread of diverse international work, perhaps through support for more networks. Now the doors of British theatres have opened wide to the world, it will be hard to close them.

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