

## RURAL TOURING TOP TIPS

**Janice Brittain, Tour Booker for Farnham Maltings, gives her top tips for companies thinking about touring rurally.**

**YOUR ROLE AS MENTOR** - Touring managers play a vital role to help reassure the rural promoter throughout, especially if this is their first promoting experience. Be mindful that their reputation is at stake and give them as much information as early as possible to start creating hype around the event. Advise them to get support to help sell tickets – it is not to be taken on single handed! Five people selling 10 tickets each could create your audience.

**PITCH THE RIGHT FEE** - This could depend upon whether you are marketing the show via a touring scheme where they help subsidise and support the venue or whether you are approaching the promoter directly. Be mindful of the purpose of the event taking place – is it for raising funds for a specific purpose or maybe just a good excuse to gather friends and families in the community? Obviously whether they need to make a profit or not may affect how you decide to price the show. Remember ‘word gets around’ and travels fast, so don’t under or over price!

**HELP SHAPE THE EVENT** - Remember it is **their** event for **their** community and **they** know their own audience intimately – you are there to help them ‘shape’ **their** unique event which will work for their community. Tread sensitively! Ask detailed questions around who the audience is and programme the show accordingly. There is no point in agreeing to an early evening show if it’s in a commuter belt. It can be frustrating but remember you are there to help guide the promoter to build their audience, rather than dictate.

**GET THE TIMING RIGHT** - It sounds obvious but timing can make or break a show and can have a negative impact. It is not always easy to agree a suitable time with the promoter which suits the tour logistics, the hall availability, the audience and the show itself. I have sat through a rural touring show which was programmed at 4pm in a village school hall on a Sunday afternoon with kids being dropped off by parents and offered sweet bags as the promoter got it in their heads it was a pantomime! The show was made for a family audience with an age guide of 8yrs+ and marketed as such with the scheme and the promoter, but clearly there was a misunderstanding. Needless to say it was a new promoter but the moral being ‘communication is the key’.

**COMMUNICATION** - Tact and diplomacy spring to mind! There is always a very fine balance between the promoter feeling they have enough information in order to literally sell the idea of your show to the rest of their Committee (or whoever else is helping them to promote the show) without revealing too much detail around the artistic content or set design. This can get very tricky if you are selling new work in advance of it having been made yet, and with rural venues planning earlier this disparity is widening. Also, don’t forget that vibrant communities which may be interested in receiving your work have busy halls!

**PRINT** - When you are designing the print REMEMBER what might work for a theatre-going audience in a theatre space probably won’t appeal to a rural touring audience. A good motto to follow is “Be brave but be gentle!” Rural audiences can be very sensitive about images on posters that they advertise around their village. I remember being told once by a local promoter “We don’t like seeing horns on our trees thank you ... we’d rather see them on our cows” – this being a reaction to a masked image with horns! Some promoters need more help than others and be generous in offering inspirational

ideas about distribution outlets after quizzing them about their local community. A little bit of encouragement goes a long way!

**SQUARE PEGS... ROUND HOLES** - A word of warning, never 'shoehorn' a show in! It will only end in disaster. No matter how much you might want that booking there is little point if you're having to persuade the promoter. If they have doubts, for whatever reason, at this stage then those doubts will end up with a lack of ticket sales or worse – a cancelled event.

**MARKETING**– Send out an early E-flyer the season before with outline details and a working image or final print image, if you've got it and don't forget to include a rough idea of tech. Always over-estimate the get in time and playing space slightly to allow for any final differentials as it won't matter if it reduces but the promoter needs to know early on what time to book the hall from and how many tickets he can sell. It goes without saying that for new work capacity is often unknown until quite late on and this needs careful communication with the promoters who are always pushing to know – of course. Chase up schemes and promoter directly, where possible, with a telephone call to start selling the show in. If you don't get onto a scheme's menu don't give up – ask them if they have any promoters that can afford to pay a direct fee to you as a one off if you are keen to tour to that area.

**PR** – Hardly any rural touring shows will be in the luxurious position of being able to afford to employ the services of a publicist. You are reliant upon the promoter here but after sending a show press release out it is worth checking in with them to see what they've done with it. Again work with them and try and think of ideas. Offer company or Director interviews to newspapers, radio stations and suggest they run a competition with a couple of free tickets as the prize. Ask more questions about where they have distributed the print and offer more for a specific purpose – maybe a book bag drop at a local school – if appropriate? Do make sure they have links with their local rags and the Parish Magazine is often a superb marketing tool in rural villages but often has surprisingly tight deadlines. Keep an eye out for reviews and keep a log.

**KITE MARKING & RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT** – We all know it takes years to build relationships and trust but the better the quality of work you are making/producing/touring then the stronger and quicker your return will be to those communities. Your ambition will be to create a quality 'kite mark' as a stamp of approval of your company's shows so schemes/promoters/audience automatically recognise it and trust in it. Remember 'today's audience member could be tomorrow's promoter'.

**CONTRACTS** – Raise a contract for each promoter if dealing directly. If dealing with a scheme make sure you have a contract from them with all the details for each performance. Really drill down to the finer details to make sure everybody is kept well informed. Make sure you have a cancellation clause in there – perhaps a sliding scale – it is worth it.

**TECH** – If you are touring a newly made piece which hasn't been designed yet then it could be worth your while asking each venue for a tech spec to pass onto the set designer as there is nothing worse than taking a booking only to find out that the wonderful newly designed set doesn't fit! Most halls will be able to provide you with a drawn plan or at the very least a hand drawn sketch.

**ACCOMMODATION & FOOD ON TOUR** – It may sound obvious but book the best accommodation you can to keep the company moral nice and upbeat. It is asking a lot of a company to be touring for weeks on end travelling in a van, living together, sharing days off, especially if they are a newly convened company that didn't know each other prior to rehearsals. If the budget will allow aim for single rooms where possible and beware of hosts that like to keep the company up into the small hours! Don't be

afraid to ask for a hot meal for the company prior to each show. Add this as a 'request' in your contract and keep a record in order to avoid lasagne 3 nights in a row! This really does make a difference as to how the company perform each night.

**KEEP THE COMPANY HAPPY** – Search high and low for the best Production or Stage Manager whilst on tour who will act as your sole point of contact. It can get complicated if all the company members decide to report in on the same day with the same point. Keep in daily contact with the Production/Stage Manager and ask them to provide a small report each night for that all important post show evaluation! This will save a lot of time in the long run. A happy company is an informed, well fed and well accommodated company who feel they are part of a team.

**TROUBLE SHOOTING** – It is unlikely that any tour will be without its challenges, especially if you hit bad weather, closed bridges, closed motorways and the dreaded snow! Ensure companies have a SatNav if possible so that they can negotiate their way forward. Get ahead, check the weather forecast and be prepared by equipping the tour van accordingly. If touring in the winter be aware of the attraction of farm cottage accommodation down a long sloping track as it is hard work digging yourself out of the snow or sliding around on ice! You soon regret the attraction of cosy and perhaps more cost effective accommodation where you can easily park the van which suddenly becomes a hazard instead of a bonus.

**FEEDBACK** – Most important of all... today's feedback helps market tomorrow's show! Thank each audience member who has taken the time to send in their comments and at the end of the tour – send the feedback around the whole company – they just love it!