Tips from Dear Venue Programmer

When to approach a venue

No two venues programme to the same time frame and this can range from 2 months to 2 or 3 years ahead. Sometimes you get lucky and get in touch at the exact moment a programmer needs to fill a gap in the schedule but more usually the process of building a season and schedule will take some time as very few venues are programmed without multiple considerations including budgets, significant and local events, funding priorities and day to day practicalities. Don't be put off getting in touch on the off-chance but be prepared to have to wait for decisions to be made.

What information to send

Ensure your tour pack includes as much information as possible. Include practical matters such as minimum size and technical requirements (as well as what would be nice to have if possible), get in and get out times, size of company, running time, whether you have an interval or not, videos, testimonials, images and access support. Don't forget to send a clear guide to what the show is and what it's about – not marketing copy for selling shows to audiences, but a description of the content, style, ideas and themes. Some areas have clear platforms to register a show with e.g. The Touring Network use tourbook (https://tourbook.live/) which is available across Scotland and Ireland. Tour Finder (http://tour-finder.org/) in the UK is a free listings site for tour ready work.

Consider who the audience is

Not every show is for everybody, and that's OK. Carefully consider who might be interested in your show including age range and other interests. Unless you have strong evidence to the contrary, trust the venue when they say they don't have an audience for your show – they've likely been there and tried that. Don't say that the show will appeal to all ages or everyone because nothing appeals to everyone, it is far more useful to be specific about who you have in mind while you're making the work. Then consider whether a particular venue is likely to be able to reach that audience.

Keep it personal but don't take it personally

In the age of heightened data and cyber security it is harder to find out who the right person to send your information to is but do try – a personalised email is much more likely to catch the attention of the programmer than a generic mailing. However if you're not getting a reply, don't take it to heart. Many programmers do try, but by way of an explanation, the quantity of emails received, the range of work to be done and the finite number of hours in the day does mean that not every email will get a response.

Money

Be upfront and make it clear what sort of a deal you're looking for, whether you're willing or able to negotiate and whether the tour is dependent on funding and if so, when you'll know the outcome of

any application. The unique size, scale, funding position and organisational priorities of each venue will dictate what they can afford and most do need to either return a profit on events or find another way to subsidise them be that through bar sales, sector support agencies or partnerships. Again, a venue is rarely looking at a show in isolation and is often trying to balance a budget across a whole season or year at a time. But don't sell yourself short – know what you need to make to ensure that everyone is paid what they were promised and that you can deliver the performances to a standard you are proud of. If you can't make the finances work then say so before committing yourself to a date, that's far better for you, venues and audiences, than a tour collapsing at a later stage.

Ticket prices

These are generally set by the venue in line with prices across a season and dependent on local price sensitivity as well as strategic objectives.

Do your research first

There's no point spending your time and energy sending information to a venue who is never going to programme your show so do your research first. Look at the size and scale of the venue, what their priorities are, the sort of work they programme and prices they charge and work out if they're likely to be able to afford your show or even find an audience for it. A venue that focuses on new writing most likely won't programme a production of an Ibsen play; a venue whose mission is to present work for families isn't going to present an hour of risqué stand-up comedy. Many venues have programming statements to help with this but if not, a glance at the programme on their website will give you a lot of information.

Venues North publish Routes In: A Guide to Getting New Work Programmed in the North of England https://arconline.co.uk/app/uploads/2021/01/Routes-In-2020.pdf which gives details of each of its members' programming priorities as well as useful things to keep in mind when tour booking.

Members of the house network in South East England, Creu Cymru and the Small Venues Network in Yorkshire are listed on their websites, where you'll also find more information and other resources and opportunities - https://housetheatre.org.uk/venues/, https://creucymru.com/membership/search-our-members & https://www.smallvenuesnetwork.org.uk/

There are lots of other venue networks in the UK, and each has a different purpose and priority – some of them are listed below:

- The Touring Network - https://thetouringnetwork.com/
- Venues South West - https://www.wiltshirecreative.co.uk/artist-development/vsw/
- Lincolnshire One Venues - https://lincolnshireonevenues.com/
- Greater Manchester Small Venues Network - https://hopemilltheatre.co.uk/greater-manchester-small-venues-network
- National Rural Touring Forum - https://www.ruraltouring.org/members/members-directory/

It can be a long relationship not purely a one-off transaction

Sometimes you'll have the right show but at the wrong time so treat conversations with venues as the start of a two-way relationship. Consider opportunities like pitching events and scratch nights to get to know local venues better. A lot of people find networking hard but persevere, remembering that the programmer you are talking to is a person too with all the same insecurities and doubts, but who cares as much about getting great work in front of audiences as you do.

These tips came up in a conversation between representatives of Creu Cymru, house, The Small Venues Network, The Touring Network and Venues North at an event for Fringe Connect 2021. The links are active at time of writing and information shared in the spirit of generosity, collaboration and supporting artists. A recording of the talk, along with a myriad of resources for artists can be found at https://connect.edfringe.com/page/resources