

THE THEATRE SHOP CONFERENCE

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Liberty Hall, Dublin

Panel Discussion – Irish Venues: Presenting International Work

Chair

Richard Wakely, International Producer/Presenter, ex Managing Director, Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and Hampstead Theatre, London

Speakers

John E. McGrath, Artistic Director, Contact Theatre, Manchester

Mary Shields, Associate Director, Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh

Ali Robertson, Director, Big Van Tours, Cork, ex Artistic Director, Granary Theatre, Cork

Chair, Richard Wakely

Good morning. There are many venues here who have already put a toe, if not a foot, into the water of presenting international work and have valuable experiences to share, some of you are presenting work from abroad at this very moment. I'm going to open by asking each of my colleagues on the panel to talk a little bit about themselves, their particular venue, and their own interest in international presentation, why they do it, and how they approach it. The reason for this is, of course, whether it's our venues presenting work from abroad, or whether it's, in this case, British venues presenting work from abroad, there are still lessons to be learned, common experiences that we share.

So, John, may I ask just to tell us about your work with Contact and your experience in presenting international work?

John McGrath, Contact Theatre, Manchester

Contact has existed in Manchester for about 30 years now. There's always been a producing theatre that focusses particularly on work formed with young people. I don't know if you are familiar with the strange history of theatre buildings in England in the last few years, where a whole bunch of lottery money was put towards rebuilding a lot of them but it went through that and re-opened in 1999 with a larger building with more spaces and a sense of inquiry

about how to be a producing theatre building focussing on young people now. The programme of work that we've ended up with is very much in three or four strands. We have a huge amount of participatory work, a vast number of programmes working with young people and young artists to create new work, ranging from drop-ins to quite intensive year-long programmes through week projects with invited artists or companies. Therefore, as part of that, we have a flow-through in the building all the time of young people and young artists, making work in all of the spaces. When you come to visit, it's often quite difficult to give you any sort of proper tour of the building because you're always stumbling into people's rehearsals all over the place.

We have a big presenting and producing strand, and I accepted in re-opening the building that we were neither able nor wanted to be a repertory house any more and that the core of the programme would not be the six plays a year that we decided to present but that we would present a range of work, much of which would come from other companies, touring nationally, internationally and locally, as well as work that we produced at the moment. We produced a couple of completely in-house new pieces of full professional work as opposed to participatory work. That'll be about four pieces next year, and probably stay about that because it feels about the right level. We'd like to blur those boundaries between participatory and professional work, anyway.

In between those participatory and presenting-producing levels, we do a big amount of work with emerging artists. What became very clear, very early on in the process of reinventing the space was that you couldn't have participatory work with young people over here and your professional productions over there and not actually be investing in the space in-between which in many ways was the most interesting one: the young people that were turning into artists, the artists that were finding new identities... So that's the range of stuff that we do.

However, how we came to do that range, how a theatre focussing on young people today... When we were re-opening this slightly cavernous building, we decided actually to do things in way that would seem very 'ass-backwards' to a lot of artistic directors and producers in theatres. We decided not to focus first and foremost on what the work would be and how to bring an audience to it. Instead, we decided to focus on what the environment would be that we could create out of which the work could grow. They're very, very different ways and

very different focuses. It meant we spent a lot of time thinking what the building felt like, thinking what kind of music would be played there, who hung out there, what sort of things were going on. And in a way, we initially in particular, picked projects, including a lot of touring work, that would contribute to the creation of that environment.

What happened out of that is that now a lot of artists use that as a base and all sorts of work starts to grow there that's maybe different to other work. Also what happened was a lot of international companies were in some way able to be part of that mix, and often had very different experiences coming to Contact, compared to ones that they'd been having on other parts of the tour because they were meeting different kinds of people, having different kinds of conversations, able to stay and drink or club until two in the morning, and things were coming out of that.

The long-term effect of that has been probably we are able to bat a bit above our league in terms of the international work that we're able to bring to the theatre because different kinds of connections and conversations have happened. However, how we do that, as a relatively small venue – we have two spaces, a studio and a 350 seater – is that we have to work all of the time with a partner or organisations to bring in international work. That may range from a very specifically focussed partner or organisation, like Queer Up North, a gay and lesbian festival based in Manchester that we work with a lot. It might involve dynamic producers in the UK, such as UK Arts International, Jan Ryan who has brought a lot of work to us. It may involve independent producers who put together particular funding packages for specific tours. What we tend to find is that people come to us quite a lot now to put us into those touring packages because of the experience that the companies will have at the venue, and because they know that they'll reach a certain kind of audience with the work that won't be reached elsewhere.

So we've sort of developed a unique selling point with that. If you want to present international work and you basically can't afford to, as we do and can't, then you need to find what else are you bringing to the package that would make that tour happen – and it might be worth more than money.

Richard Wakely

Mary, tell us a little bit about your work at the Assembly Rooms, and how you've gone about presenting work from overseas?

Mary Shields, Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh

If I might start by explaining a little bit about the physical make-up of the building, it has a relevance to what we do, obviously. We take over a large civic building in Edinburgh for the duration of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, but only for the Festival, and within that we construct six theatre spaces which run concurrently every day. They range in size from an intimate 96-seater up to a 630-seater so we have a wide range of venues working virtually 24 hours round the clock for the four weeks of the Festival. We programme in the region of 65 to 70 companies in that four-week period, and as we run up to seven or eight shows in each venue a day, you're looking at about 1,500 performances over the Festival period.

So we have large, kind of practical challenges in bringing work into the building but our philosophy, since we were set up 20 years ago, has been very much to present quality theatre and quality services to audiences and to the companies that we present, which shouldn't seem like an unusual kind of aim but Assembly was the first Fringe venue to establish that kind of philosophy. A lot of the Fringe still operates on a completely open booking system. It's an area of great debate, I think, across the Fringe as a whole – the contrast between the programmed venues and the non, the commercialisation of the Fringe and so on – but we continue to defend a very high-quality theatre programme that is selective. As such, we rely very heavily on a strong international programme, about a third of our theatre programme comes from abroad.

But we're not in any position, as a non-funded Fringe venue, to put any cash into bringing any work over from abroad, which puts us in a pressured position, as companies visiting are, as well. I think it's important to consider the competitive nature of the programming environment in Edinburgh as well. We're programming at the same time as over 200 other venues similarly looking to find the Fringe gems that are going to make the splash and make themselves a name for the future and hopefully go on to the kind of touring that makes Edinburgh legitimate for companies coming from abroad.

So we're involved in a process which has started now, for the next festival, in trying to amass a large volume of work in a very short, concentrated period of time, that is of high quality, and which does not require us to invest money. The challenge is quite evident. It's further intensified by the fact that we don't have any research budget, as such – we have less than a thousand pounds a year to go and see international work. So our ethos is very much a collaborative one. On the one hand, we do deal with an enormous number of unsolicited applications to the festival, probably to the excess of about 400 or 500 a year. Now, at any one time, we know that any of those companies is likely to be talking to maybe ten other venues, so it is a competitive kind of environment, and it is one which involves really rigorous research into what we're looking at. We don't have the resources to travel and see companies, we have to base our judgements, which are time-pressured, on the materials we have or what we can find out through our partners. We work with an enormous number of presenters and practitioners across the world, and largely other festivals, but certainly with key promoters. In the UK, we also work with Jan Ryan, Guy Masterson, who is an absolute Fringe icon. These are people who in a sense become almost part-programmers of the venue, because the risk they're taking is enormous, they have a great understanding of what we're doing and what we present. I think it's important to stress that collaborative nature. Although it doesn't tend to be a financial one, it is a collaboration on judgement and what will or won't work, which is, of course, what it all boils down to, really.

In the very risky environment that Edinburgh is, I think that when companies are bringing work there, they're participating in an age-old tradition of fairs and festivals which are simply predicated on human curiosity. Our job is, I think, a practical one – to match the companies that come to us largely unknown with the curiosity of our audience which we are fortunate in knowing is wide and very hungry for international work, and we're fortunate to pull from five other festivals running concurrently in Edinburgh.

Our approach to programming is mostly collaborative, I would say. One of the most important things about Edinburgh is its role as a marketplace for other arts professionals, and its role in aiding relationships to grow into other relationships.

Richard Wakely

Thank you for that. Ali Robertson joins myself in a small but growing number of independent producers – so tell us about your own approach to this area of work.

Ali Robertson, Big Van Tours, Cork

Until recently, I was running the Granary Theatre in Cork, a small but fairly busy theatre with a wide range of international presentations. We encouraged as much international programming as we possibly could. While doing this, I observed that the level of international theatre being presented in Ireland was lower, I thought, than it should or could be. At the same time, a large number of venues were at conferences I went to, saying, ‘We’re out trying to find more work.’

Big Van Tours was set up to try to increase what I thought was a low level of international theatre touring, particularly outside the capital. It’s underpinned by the belief that those international theatre companies that do tour to Ireland play to a quite small number of venues, and as result the sort of cost-per-show is unattractively high. For venues, particularly venues outside Dublin, that means that to programme international work is often financially unrealistic. Furthermore, I think that there is a knowledge gap from both venues and companies. I think that the knowledge from venue managers of international work is increasing quite steadily, but there’s still a way to go. I also think that few foreign companies are aware of many Irish venues. There isn’t a history of touring here, particularly of the huge number of venues that have built in the past decade or so.

Over the summer, I went round to a number of venues and festivals within Ireland, emphasising the point that if we could create networks to programme international theatre tours, then it could be to everyone’s good. The costs could come down, there could be a symbiosis of once a company plays in Dublin and for five weeks elsewhere, it becomes national news, and the company becomes quite important.

What Big Van Tours is trying to do is to increase co-operation between venues in Ireland when they present international work. At the moment, there are little clusters of venues that present in partnership: there’s a cluster in the Midlands, there’s the Dublin corridor that often get together to present things. Big Van Tours is trying to make that national so that when an

international company comes over to play in Ireland, they have the opportunity to tour far more widely than they do at present.

Richard Wakely

So can I just ask you all, and you've all touched on this but let's develop it a little more: how each of you, in your own particular circumstances, go about sourcing international work for your theatre, with perhaps examples of work you've done. And also talk a little bit about your planning horizons as well, which is a particular factor of presenting international work.

John McGrath

There's no simple answer, actually. I'm just trying to think of this season, the international work that we have coming in. There's a piece from Croatia: the company approached us because of a Manchester-based company we were working with that they were in touch with, and they were putting together a short tour with a national touring programme grant with Contact, Sadler's Wells and two other places. Then they raised the money entirely for the tour and are coming to us at a very reasonable cost. We would probably never have heard about it without that particular connection so it's like, in a way, having tentacles all over the place is a key thing. It's not like there's a directory that you go to; that's not how to find the interesting stuff.

Richard Wakely

Is this part of the idea you're talking about in terms of partnership?

John McGrath

It's partnership, it's relationship, but you know, all of those words very quickly become like dogmas, don't they, so I think that's where I may say 'tentacles' or something instead. There's one performance artist I'm flying over from New York, she's the only Pakistani performance artist based in New York, who has quite a lot to say at the moment, so I'm just putting her on a plane, sorting out the work visa, and getting her over to do a piece of work.

Queer Up North will come to us with particular ideas about work they want to do. They understand us as a venue that's reaching for a younger, edgier crowd, so they'll come to us with particular kinds of work that they'll come with a substantial amount of money towards

making that happen (they apply for grants). Jan Ryan, UK Arts International, will try and sell us the tour but again, I know Jan really well at this point and there's a trust that the work is the right work, and secondly, there is that sense that they will be pitching us hopefully at a lower cost than some place because they know what we can afford and there is a commitment there to reach the kind of young, urban audiences that we reach. UK Arts International does a lot of international work from the African diaspora and it has a commitment that the audiences who see that work in England are not entirely white middle-class audiences – so again, we have a venue that to a degree can also help deliver those audiences.

So there's different stakes each time, and different ways of putting it through, usually there's somebody else involved in putting together a tour, and somebody else involved in raising money, although our involvement can help them raise that money.

Richard Wakely

Mary, in terms of your own approaches to sourcing work, you did talk about this a bit before. You don't have a travel budget to go out, but you take submissions, obviously.

Mary Shields

We take a huge number of submissions, and out of those, only a handful in any year will result in a company coming. It's a very labour-intensive part of what we do, sifting and researching and trying to find out more about these companies.

Richard Wakely

What are you looking for from those companies, exactly what criteria, if you wish, do you apply to them?

Mary Shields

Well, that's something we're asked quite a lot. I don't have an answer, and I haven't had an answer for the last ten years, I don't think. It's almost impossible to identify what it is about, if it is a completely unknown company. I just saw Neil Murray there, and one that always stands out in my mind, for some reason, is when we got a submission from a Canadian company and the title of the show was The Fall of the House of Pussy Plunkett. Forgive me but I don't think you can resist some titles, and I don't wish to seem superficial about this at

all, but it is extraordinary how often your immediate reaction to something, once followed through, actually does result in that happening. I love that kind of thing because I think it goes back to that creativity/curiosity thing Declan Donnellan mentioned in interview earlier – you can't always put your finger on why something just sparks your curiosity, an unknown foreign company, what is it about them, what is about their story that will work here.

I don't have an answer other than that sort of constant quest; and we do have haphazard and piecemeal relationships over the years with different companies that have come out through the strangest conversations. We've got a long history with ex-Soviet Georgia which has resulted in some absolutely beautiful collaborations. These are largely funded by visiting artists, so we have had a more kind of formal and normal route to presenting that work.

One initiative that we did undertake this year for the first time in many years was to 'theme' an element of our theatre programme, and we presented a season called 'New York, New Work', which might seem to be a very obvious thing to have done in current times but it actually was conceived before the events of September 11th. It was done largely from a practical point-of-view because we chose to spend our entire programming budget on going to New York twice and there we were able to see in excess of 30 shows, very varied, really challenging, and out of the 30 we brought 12, and we were able to umbrella them and market them as 'themed' this season. It was incredibly successful, huge artistic acclaim for the companies, several tours that are now being booked, a great result, really. I'm particularly pleased because we've now developed a model. Now whether we can transfer that to countries which are not as well represented in Edinburgh, because certainly there's a dominance of the North American and Australian companies for linguistic and cultural reasons, but we'd love to take that model and transfer it somewhere else, and we're working hard to develop that.

Richard Wakely

Ali talked earlier on about the knowledge gap here in Ireland. The gap is growing smaller, as we learn more and appreciate more work from abroad, and also as we try to spread the word further afield about what we have to offer as venues and presenters here. In your role, as an independent producer, I suppose you're trying to mediate between the venues and the

producers, you're trying to make companies from abroad aware of what the opportunities are over here. How do you fill in those gaps? How do you intend to in the future?

Ali Robertson

You're absolutely correct in that. When I was visiting venues, quite a lot of them were interested in the project, so one advantage for them was that if it started off giving good work, Big Van Tours would be a place that could guarantee quality. Not necessarily guarantee, but I think all venues get a lot of submissions that you just don't know about, where often you are flying by the seat of your pants. Big Van Tours, if it gets trust behind it, will hopefully act as a quality funnel, so even if you don't know the work, you can feel a little better about taking it. So you're correct that that is a positive advantage for many venues.

Deliberately, it was almost left to second place as to how we were going to source the shows because I felt that I would make certain discoveries and tailor the shows that we were searching for to fit. One thing that I did think very strongly was that if the level of international work is going to increase in Ireland, then the level of UK touring is the obvious place to start, for geographical reasons, language barrier, accessibility reasons. British shows are comparatively easy to source if you're here. Other than that, I think you're looking at marketplaces, and Edinburgh is still the obvious one here. There have been efforts over the past couple of years to set up a sort of Cannes Festival-style thing for theatre. There's the Junction 07 Festival down in Clonmel which attempts to showcase shows with the notion of putting together tours afterwards. I'd say that it still is a problem here, trying to get out to see the work. It's a very substantial problem.

Richard Wakely

I think that's a very good note to open on. Those of you who have worked with me in the past or are working with me know that one of the approaches I take, being a producer bringing international work in, is to try and get the commitment of the venues in advance. I think it's very important that people see the work and buy into it at an early stage. And that can only be best done by seeing the work firsthand. It's often fine sending a video and press reviews but there's nothing like actually seeing the work in an auditorium, talking to the artist yourselves, and then making that emotional commitment, as all of us do as arts practitioners, to what the

artist is saying and how they can connect with our audiences. So I think showcasing is something that I absolutely endorse Ali's views on.

Jeff Colbert, Director, Ausable Theatre, Ontario, Canada

I'm actually here in Dublin for the Fringe Festival. I've got a show called Work on at Andrew's Lane Studio, so I'm in the middle of my run. You were talking about how you get access to shows and see them so that you can choose. From my perspective – and this is the very first time a five-year old company has actually left Ontario, Canada, so I'm coming in fresh – the question is, basically, can you deliver the audience? I come here, the Fringe itself liked what they saw in what I sent them, they came over, they came out to the show, The Irish Times liked the show, and that was really good, but the audiences haven't really materialised. So I guess the short question would be, maybe mostly for Mary, it's a question of when we're far away and thinking of coming to these places, whether there's going to be some effort to get an audience because we don't have the touchy-feely on the ground connections that make our shows work at home.

Richard Wakely

Jeff raises a point, which, of course, has to do with any work we present, whether it's from home or abroad, as presenters and venues or whatever: delivering an audience, that the artists arrive, there is support for them, and interest in their work. It isn't just, as I say, for international companies. Maybe it's really a question for Irish venues. Anyone here like to make any comments about relationships with audiences?

Ali Robertson

Just briefly, we all know that if we could guarantee audiences we'd be driving big cars. The case of companies coming over cold, and just getting at this point a response is something that we've got to be wary of. Again, I'll mention very briefly, the notion of 'tours snowballing'. I think that tours snowball from length. If an international or a national company tours nationwide, for a certain amount of time, it suddenly reaches a level of 'substantialness' that means there is national interest, or that you've got a start towards getting an audience there. I'd also say that return visits are very important. An international company that comes the first time gets a little bit of an audience; the second time it gets more of an audience. It's very difficult to guarantee it the first time. I do think that trying to go for

the bit extra, trying to go for top quality, trying to get the substantial tour, trying to look for a different angle is quite important because when you're international, you realise you're in competition with companies that do have that touchy-feely thing on the ground, you are in competition with a great number of Dublin-based companies.

Mary Shields

I think it's very relevant to the whole Edinburgh festival thing; the beauty and the horror of Edinburgh is that there really is no second chance. After the first week, you know very well which shows are going to take off and are going to happen. Although I think we're in a strong position at Assembly, we've got a lot of years experience behind us, we've got the best press team that it's possible to put together, we have a kind of comfort zone, but it's by no means a guarantee, and it is desperate and painful to see a show that deserves to be doing well not doing well. That does happen in Edinburgh and it's the most awful thing. But again, it's part and parcel of our programme. We have a responsibility to ourselves to maintain the kind of artistic level that we're aspiring towards, but we do have a huge responsibility to companies because, in the end, we're not taking as much of the risk and it's a very exposed market, and it's the best place to succeed, I think. It's such a triumphant feeling, but it is desperate not to. It's something that both parties have to go into very aware of – and that's a function of ours, too, to make sure that people are totally aware of what they're going in to, as far as we can, and to look after them as well as we can.

Richard Wakely

I think, also, advance media coverage and publicity is very important, and it's certainly another approach which I tend to take, to try to take an artist two or three months before the gig to meet the media, and get good editorial. This is a very literate society, with the major opinion-formers being the press and the media. I think that's a particular approach the venues appreciate when I talk to them; getting the word out early, and getting it out in a very targeted way as well.

John McGrath

You can do everything that you can, you can rethink it from the ground up, do what you know to do well, there's always that moment when, as Mary says, you suddenly realise that something's going to take off or that awful moment when you realise that a project is just not

going to take off this time. It is also about the quality of the work, if you've got a small number of people in that room with you, it is about the quality of that experience, and those people talk to people, and in any town, any festival, those word-of-mouth networks are crucial, and they build. The company comes back, and the response is different next time. I think also that venues and festivals shouldn't be judged on, you know, 'Did you get the right number of bums on seats for me coming over this time'? What was the whole quality of the experience? And how can that build into a future relationship?

Gillian Mitchell, Deputy Director, Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast

I just wanted to comment on what you said. I take your point, obviously, but it's a touchy subject. Having currently programmed, and worked on the other side in marketing – it happens all the time, sometimes there's a higher expectation to deliver audiences that you can never really realise, no matter what you're doing. From the programming side of things, as Mary said, there's no one answer about why I'd take a show, and there are lots of different reasons. There are times when I take work and I know that it's not going to get a huge audience. You know, the marketing officer rolls her eyes and says, 'This is going to be a hard one', but we do what we can, we spend the time, year round, trying to grow our audiences, trying to develop what we call Old Museum audiences, and that they take a little faith with us if that's what it takes. Sometimes they just won't, and we have to ensure that what it was still worth the companies' while coming over. They may not be sold out every night, but we like to think that they have a rich experience, in other ways, of being at our venue. It's not to say that that's going to compensate, but whenever all else has failed, at least we can put our hand on our heart and say we really tried. The Old Museum might be a bit different from a festival in that we pay guarantees where we can, very small ones, but guarantees nonetheless, so it's amazing to me that sometime companies would come around and not realise that there's a financial risk for us, as well, artistically. Sometimes, it just doesn't work, but when it does, it's fantastic, but sometimes it doesn't, but that's no reason not to have companies. Whether or not there's an audience for it isn't always the first decision that we make.

Claudia Buckley, Theatre Officer, Canada Council of the Arts, Ottawa

I just want to continue on the other topic, in terms of the infrastructure that exists in different countries to accept touring and to look at touring. I think, in Canada in the last few years, there's been a huge interest in touring abroad, and we have many people going to the

Edinburgh Festival, and they come through the funding agency of the Canada Council. I think the knowledge of what exists internationally on the part of Canadians needs to be bumped up, and we're trying to do that by sending people like me here, but importantly by sending artists abroad. These artists could be presenters or artistic producers. Getting them out of Canada to make their own artistic contacts – because I think as you said, it's human basis on which collaborations take place, but first you have to create the ties that will allow those collaborations to take place. And on the other side, the infrastructure part of touring Canada is developing presenter infrastructures and festival infrastructures, so the companies that want to come to Canada can be funded by the company inviting them if they go to one or more festivals. The Canada Council does provide funding for some of this as well as our Department of Foreign Affairs. For instance, we will provide funding for international presenters to come to Canada to see festivals or to see work, and vice versa, we send Canadians abroad to interest Europeans in work. But in any event, I just think those ties that need to be built, we're on the right track, because Canada is in sort of the same position of trying to get people abroad. I do have with me a caseful of directories of Canadian presenters and festivals, it's all on a website also, but I do have hard copies of the stuff if you want to find out afterwards, because there is funding around these things, but sometimes it's not obvious that it's there.

Richard Wakely

I think Claudia touches on a couple of very interesting issues, and certainly the support for presenters to see the work, to make contacts, and the financial support, frankly, for supporting international work here in Ireland perhaps isn't as developed as elsewhere. We don't have, for instance, an equivalent of Visiting Arts, a British organisation which helps to bring in work from abroad. We don't have that. I think what we do have here in Ireland is a number of very good foreign missions and cultural counterparts. The British Council is extremely active, positively so in the country here, and many other cultural institutes are as well. Claudia, I can tell that you my experience with the Canadian authorities is only positive. They have been so helpful on the company I'm bringing in next year, and actually, it's made the difference. I can't do what I do without that sort of partnership, that sort of financing, because I know my colleagues in the venues couldn't pay the real cost, the real price. So to have a government agency coming in behind us saying, 'Yeah, this is a quality piece of work, that's an endorsement, and we're going to support you financially', that's a great comfort, not

just for me and the artists, but for our colleagues and presenters over here. It's absolutely key, and to go back to a point that Ali made earlier on, we're trying to become more aware of what's out there ourselves. I wonder how many Irish theatre presenters here have had the chance to go abroad and see work themselves. Do you get the opportunity, would you like the opportunity, do you find you have the time within your very busy days, to go abroad? Have you found any support for that?

Ali Robertson

Just one further point, you bring up the British Council who I think is a very welcome presence here in Ireland. You're correct, we don't have Visiting Arts, we don't any comparative body – what we do have, however, is a lot of virgin ground, and I think that if you suggest bringing the first company from X-country over to visit Ireland, that can be very attractive. That's just something that I'm finding recently, with a particular country that I'm speaking to.

Richard Wakely

Attractive to whom?

Ali Robertson

Attractive to the funding bodies, the embassies, or cultural attachés, the notion that 'This is the first time an artistic link can be formed between the two countries'. I have found very recently that this has been an argument which has impressed the embassy greatly.

John McGrath

Can I come in with an advert there, for those who might be interested in UK black and Asian work? There's going to be a big, three-day-long showcase of probably all the major companies and many emerging artists in Manchester, covering all the venues in Manchester. It's May Bank Holiday weekend, the first or second full weekend of May, and it's being organised by the Arts Council. I would recommend that people try and get over, specifically for promoters and international presenters, to get a familiarity with that work. It would be well worth the cost of getting over to Manchester and there'll be dozens and dozens of companies on.

Richard Wakely

That's a very useful bit of advice, particularly for a country like Ireland which is predominantly white but which is now dealing with issues of immigration and ethnicity.

Michael Butler, Artist in Residence, San Jose Repertory Theatre, California

I lived in New York for 25 years, and speak as somebody who created a lot of work back in the heyday of performance art, in the 1980s, and went to a lot of international festivals – toured India, Morocco, not the really 'high-end' festivals, but interesting ones – and now works in a theatre that, because of our 'sister city' relationship with Dublin, our Artistic Director thought that that 'sister city' relationship could be a cultural one as well as a business one. We brought over The Abbey Theatre, we have produced the American premiere of Marina Carr's work, and of course are looking for more opportunities like that, and would very much like to be on the other side of it and bring over something of ours to Ireland and any other country. Of course, money, as people have pretty obliquely and straightforwardly hinted at, is a gigantic problem, even for us, especially now, because of what's happening. I guess one thought I was having, which might be more for you, John, because of the kind of stuff you do, you're interested in blurring presenting professional work with incorporating the talent that you have there, is it possible to bring over a director or even an actor, or some sort of designer, in a way create a piece using your people and using someone from another country which isn't going to be near as expensive for either party – is that feasible? Is it interesting?

John McGrath

I think it is feasible, and it's certainly something we're moving towards. It is much better when it grows out of some mutual understanding and conversation. I think that, for us, over the first three years since the re-opening, it's been a lot about inviting work into the building, inviting artists into the building to start those conversations going, and understanding each other's work, so that it doesn't become that kind of cherry-picking of certain artists that people have heard of and sticking them together. I think to build up the relationships and an understanding perhaps sometimes through touring work, but then always having those conversations while you have the rare benefit of those artists amongst you, to spark whether they're going to be projects that you produce as a theatre or collaborations that somehow take on a life of their own because these artists have met. I think they are very positive directions

to go in, there can be cost benefits to them, but the bottom line is: what are these cross-national conversations that we're having, and what is the work that can result out of it?

Richard Wakely

I think of collaborations as a way forward, and in recent years started to explore the whole nature of co-producing here. There is a culture of thinking of partnering up, whether that's advantageous in partnering up with colleagues and artists outside the country, I think that's something we have to explore, and you're quite right, it has to come from a natural empathy and understanding of the work.

Mary Shields

I am curious as to how many practitioners here attended the British Council showcase in Edinburgh. I think that's had a very marked effect on the energy of the theatre programme across the Fringe, and although it concentrates on UK work, there are 250+ international delegates invited to see the work, and inevitably there's a trickle effect, whether it's with any of the presenters.

Audience Member, unidentified

I don't think that anyone here was actually invited.

Mary Shields

That's what I was curious to know. It's every two years and it's happening next year, next festival, and it's definitely something worth thinking about.

Richard Wakely

Tony Reilly, Director of the British Council, might like to comment about that.

Tony Reilly, incoming Director of the British Council in Ireland

I'll just introduce myself and take some of the blame and the fame for the nice comments that were made about us. Ali Robertson's been a bit shy and coy, but we were delighted, I think it was a plot hatched, I don't know whether it was before or after the Assembly Rooms in Edinburgh, when Ali agreed to do the research behind the Big Van project. He came to my predecessor at the British Council with the idea and it seemed something we'd be happy to be

associated with and funding. Blame and fame, if we haven't made presenters and people within the community aware of the showcase – apologies. I can say that being the new kid on the block, I can put my head on the block because I wasn't here. Get in touch with us, and I'd be delighted, within limited resources as always, to look at opportunities to take people to Edinburgh to see work.

The British Council operate, as most people know, along a continuum from funding to active partners collaborating in projects. My preference, I think a growing preference of the organisation, is to be at the other end although it would be naïve to assume that people aren't also interested in us for whatever funding resources we have available. We operate, and have operated, mainly bilaterally, UK to overseas countries, but increasingly, and I think that this is very welcome, we are looking very much at multinational initiatives, where the British Council's networks, with Richard and I hatching a bit of a South African plot, might tap into the British Council's network and contacts and partners in Ireland, to co-produce and put on some work, that's maybe three-way. I think that's an interesting development.

Richard Wakely

Thanks for that, Tony. Anybody else? Particularly I want to hear from our Irish colleagues about their experiences presenting international work, and the reaction of audiences here, and some of the practical implications/obstacles with trying to present international work.

Willie White, Artistic Director, Project Arts Centre, Dublin

Just with regard to Jeff's comment earlier on, it can be quite difficult to present your work in the context of the Dublin Fringe Festival, which runs in tandem with the Dublin Theatre Festival, so it's a very competitive environment. On the one hand, you rely on the splash the publicity and advertising people have for going to theatre at a particular time of year. From my point of view as a venue, what we try to do is create a relationship with audiences, so that if people then come and are presented in Project, the idea would be that we engage our audience – as Ali was alluding to earlier on, there's a kind of 'Q-mark' or something that our audience trusts us, that there would be a quality to the experience. That's very important to consider, so that perhaps people can still look at Dublin's Fringe as being a showcase and

begin to generate from that the right people to come and see it, so that you may get business at a later stage from venues around the country.

Another thing that was touched on that's interesting, and that I'm interested in, is having those kind of conversations John is talking about, about co-producing and co-commissioning. There's a long, long lead-in time to those kinds of things but if you look at the work that tours around Europe – I went to see a Castellucci show in Avignon and there were about eight different co-producers. Now, we wouldn't necessarily be operating on the same level, but that's perhaps a model that people can look at. It's a very complex thing to get off the ground, but if enough people put a bit of money into the pot, you can actually come up with something substantial. There's all kinds of other issues as well, pertaining to who produces it–

Richard Wakely

Artistic control –

John McGrath

I think that is a complicated one. For me that wouldn't work because there wouldn't be the 'groundedness' in the venue, and I think that for me, it does fall apart as often as it can pull together. Can you find a way towards a co-production with another venue or another company or another combination of venues and companies that makes sense, that has a 'groundedness', that has a relationship to each of the partners? I think that that's very different to sticking in your ten grand into that 'big international name show'.

Willie White

I agree with you, and I also try to think of things as 'work' rather than 'product' in the sense in which those enormous things are more often product than work. I'm really talking about talking to one or maybe two other people in the making of a work. I agree with you: it needs to have something of that groundedness in order to make sense of being presented in the venue in which I work at, anyway.

John McGrath

And when you do get that, there's a huge net benefit in the sense that you move away from the sense, that a lot of theatre and arts centres historically have, of being the vision of one person. Instead these more difficult but more interesting conversations happen, and that's also how diversity, in the true sense of the word, starts to introduce itself into a venue as well, because different opinion makers, different aesthetics, are trying to understand how they might put a piece of work together.

Richard Wakely

Maybe that's what we'll talk about, collaborations or commissioning as a way to promoting or developing into an international dialogue.

Neil Murray, Director, Tron Theatre, Glasgow

I just want to talk about another model of collaboration, which is one we're actively involved in Glasgow, which is not so much co-producing the actual project ourselves. The Tron is working with the CCA, and the Tramway in Glasgow, on Six Stages Festival Glasgow, which is a festival of Canadian work, and we're presenting between three venues, I think seven shows, over a month. That came about purely from a meeting I had with Sheri Johnson in Toronto, and we talked about this idea of a small, really containable festival, nothing Edinburgh, nothing like the Dublin Fringe, nothing as big as that, but a small, manageable programme. It became very obvious that we couldn't do it out of the Tron, because we've got one space and we wanted to produce our own thing and play anyway as part of that season. In order to make it a bigger thing, and it's ridiculous it doesn't happen more often, we started talking to venues in our city, saying why don't the three of us sign up for this and buy into it? So what happened was the Tron, the CCA and the Tramway made a joint application to the Scottish Arts Council and they funded us as presenting collaborators. So we produced a small brochure, a small contained festival, but it's had a huge amount of coverage and a huge amount of press. And that seems to me a good way of showing international work, at slightly less risk than taking a one-off company on their own. We've managed to mix up the companies so we've had DaDa Camera and One Yellow Rabbit, who've been regular visitors to Glasgow, alongside Marie Brassard, who works with Robert LePage, who's not perceived as a solo artist in Scotland. What we've managed to do is – we know there's a trust, I know

that when One Yellow Rabbit play Glasgow they pack out, so then I hope for our audience, if they're coming to see the Rabbits, they'll come to see Andy Jones as well, and don't just come to see our work, please go to CCA and Tramway. Who knows, it may fall flat on its face next week, it's been interesting to do it in terms of a genuinely collaborative way, and if any of you want to come see some good Canadian work in the next month, Glasgow's the place to be!

Richard Wakely

Neil draws on three very good general points: making it an event, sharing the risk, and attracting outside support. I certainly think that's a very clever way to move internationally forward, particularly in a new market like Ireland, where we're just starting out down this road. And also, what we haven't touched on, is the difficulty in presenting international work away from a cosmopolitan, metropolitan centre like Dublin. We're presenting international work around rural Ireland as well, where the audience mix and make-up is very different, and that dynamic is very different indeed.

Catherine Nunes, Artistic Director, International Dance Festival of Ireland

I was just thinking, when everyone else was talking, that it really all boils down to the same thing, which is creating the right context for work. I think the context, whether it be the venue, within a festival, be co-commissions, co-productions, all these things need to happen with an integrity and a kind of 'organicity' if there's such a word, so that in all areas of it you keep the trust and the faith of the public, and you maximise, within creating the right context for the right work, the possibility of audience. I think that was very clearly demonstrated in the first International Dance Festival, in May, over which there was a large suspicion about audiences for dance and it having been a poor relation for years and years. We were very careful about how we programmed it for the specific needs of the Irish audience and we ended up with 80% capacity overall, which I think was quite phenomenal for a first international festival of an art form which traditionally wouldn't have had the kind of confidence theatre would have in Ireland.

Tricia Howley, Information Officer, Institute of Choreography and Dance, Cork

It's been interesting for me listening to people talk about developing venues, whereas, where I work, it's really not a venue, it's a choreographic research centre, and occasionally then we

have shows on. It's interesting to me that the Dance Festival was such a fantastic success. Where I'm working, it's about helping people to make dance and how we do that is really by collaborations all the time. We're funded to do research, so we can bring any of the choreographers from various places to come and bring quite small groups of people into a very small studio space, sometimes for block periods, through the year. That's how you end up with an international festival that will provide the facility for people locally to connect internationally. We absolutely rely on those collaborations and it also means that in a non-cosmopolitan venue, people from that part of the country can actually come and work with really senior people, who'd never have the chance to work with abroad, and that's the way it works.

Richard Wakely

I think all these issues are terribly important because creating a critical mass of interest and audience response to international work is very important. Whatever happens at the Project, at the International Dance Festival or in Cork is very important for the future development of artistic practice within an international context here in Ireland.

Bairbre Ní Chaoimh, Artistic Director, Calypso Productions, Dublin

There is a social relevance to all of our work in Calypso. I'd just like to make one comment. I think it's been fantastic, this dialogue, it's been really brilliant, but one of the sadder things that we're just beginning to experience in Ireland, over the last couple of years, a lot of our international community, who are now living in Ireland, are asylum seekers and refugees. Unfortunately all this wonderful art is not accessible to them, purely from a money point of view. So it seems to me they're caught every way. Asylum seekers aren't allowed work, so they're getting €19 a week, and a lot of tickets cost more than that. I think we're in a situation where, even though we don't want be elitist, that is happening, and I would love to see a way around that. We've tried, in our own small way, to subsidise the ticket prices, if a show is doing really well, for people at the other end of the scale, who just can't afford it, and I think maybe we could spare a thought of finding ways around that too. □