

# The International Village of Culture Conference

St Aidan's College, Durham Tuesday 31 March to Friday 3 April 2009

Organised by National Rural Touring Forum

A report from Duncan MacInnes and Polly MacInnes, SEALL events, Skye, attending for PAN

## Did you know?

***"Break Dancing started in Norway 100 years ago."***

***"You cannot get from north to south Wales by train without entering England."***

***"South African 'Angels' invented swallows to tell humans not to be so stupid."***

***"In the 1800s 500 Scottish farmers emigrated to Poland."***

***"Before mobile phones, Estonians used bagpipes to contact each other at a distance."***

***"Musicians already network with each other across international borders."***

Two of these might be a myth; two are true and two are arguable!

## Introduction

After Newcastle/Gateshead failed to receive the accolade of International City of Culture (won by Liverpool) passing comments made at a "blue-sky drinking session" late at one NRTF conference led to the observation that International Culture need not be city based.

Why not an **International Village of culture - IVOC?**

Very soon the regional arts council was aboard, offering NRTF two years membership of the International European Theatre Network and visits to their gathering in Istanbul. NRTF established funding collaboration with 'Culture 10', and worked the Northern Consortium of NRTF promoting schemes to develop the idea from the ground up.

Note the attitude of agencies: the funding and cultural agencies immediately took aboard the strength and experience of those working on the ground and enabled them to develop their ideas into an event of national importance. Could this be possible in Scotland, where national agencies seem to foist ideas upon the arts community and expect them to deliver . . . or am I being too critical?

At IVOC in Durham, 120 representatives came together for a four-day conference, with showcases and collaborations from Norway, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Poland, South Africa and the UK.

Scotland was represented by Duncan and Polly MacInnes of SEALL, Skye, (and Tamara Hedderwick of Coll) reporting back to PAN; with Muriel MacLeod of Theatre Hebrides and HITN, and Emma Witters from Imagine. Jon Morgan of the Federation of Scottish Theatres was also a speaker.

**Tuesday 31 March 2009**

## **Welcome and Opening Session**

The conference was introduced by Chair **Phylida Shaw**, a freelance events consultant, who presented clear aims and aspirations, in a well planned and researched welcome. Each morning she focused out thoughts onto the day ahead and reflected on what had already happened.

**John Laidlaw**, chair of the National Rural Touring Forum

***“touring arts let the village breathe”***

What is ‘International?’ Does it mean foreign, strange or is it better used as ‘sharing’?

***“The term Village can be used in an urban setting.”***

**Stella Hall** used the arts across the divide in Belfast.

***“Buildings are nothing without people.”***

## **International Collaborative Commissions**

One of the delights of IVOC was the presentation of live shows through the four days and the opportunity to talk with artists who stayed for the whole festival.

**Grand Theatre of Lemmings**, presented a comedy piece on the Evolutionary Theories and Life of Darwin. Using illusion, music (clarinet, banjo and song) animation (Darwin’s book opening up to produce two screens with video projection) and puppets (Lonely George the Tortoise). The collaboration for them was working with two other companies and introducing music and animation to their work. This was a very ‘English’ style of acting and seemed a little old fashion in presentation. And yet I know it will go down well on the English touring Circuit.

**Dodgy Clutch** with the **African Indigenous Music and Dance Orchestra**.

A beautiful collaboration with the South African dance and theatre company from Eastern Cape. Part of a longer piece – the story of a young woman writing to her brother who has travelled north. He won’t answer letters so she writes via a ‘swallow’, created by SA gods to get the message to the world that humans are acting stupid and ruining it. The swallows then travel north and arrive ‘home’ in the UK (where they put up black umbrellas and look cold!) for the second story of a Durham Miner and the release of pit ponies into the open as the pits close. The SA dancers were amazing story-tellers and performers, as ‘swallows’ and elephants, behind a back-lit screen, and then as pit ponies. The ponies’ release is also the release of miners from their work (was that a good thing via a miners’ strike?) and also the release of Mandela and the SA people from apartheid. Some beautiful jokes, images and ideas - the best one being that swallows return ‘home’ both to those in SA and in Britain.

## **Discussion.**

***“We have briefly stepped on a train that has stopped for the afternoon. A train of international collaboration that started some years ago and that has been trundling along gaining speed and steam.”***

***“What matters is the scale of ambition, not the scale of the company size.”***

The SA swallow dancer said

***“When I asked what I should do, I was just told to fly to the UK. We have to become part of the story, not part of the show.”***

Dodgy Clutch is now working with a UK architect to build an outdoor performance space of some size in the Eastern Cape.

Suggestions: Are there Gap-year projects which have cultural aims?

Local Funding for such a performance – sell the conservation concept of this piece to such as RSPB.

## **Evening Show**

**Orkestra Del Sol** strutted their stuff in great style and led to the first spontaneous performance from a young Estonian and young Polish woman who demonstrated close international liaison through spontaneous dance! This was followed by one of the young South African dancers taking to the floor to break-dance during an Orkestra Del Sol number.

## Wednesday 1 April

### Theme of the Day and Welcome

The opening welcome included an award of two daffodils for the dancers last night. We were warned of an April Fool but nothing transpired as far as we were aware!

### Making Work

**Tony Fegan** lives in the community of Tallaght to the south of Dublin. He used to live just inside the Pale in Dublin, so was always close to ***‘stepping outside to the unknown’***, in life and in art. Tallaght in Co Wicklow now has a strong local arts provision.

Does art reflect community? Rural stories such as ‘foot and mouth’ hit the headlines but there has been no cultural response to these issues.

He spoke of his visit to Portugal and a project called ‘Percusos’ in an area where economic migrants from the rural areas went to cities leaving only the young and the very old behind – a familiar pattern in many other areas. In Ireland there is the familiar pattern of a two week return trip home during which there is much celebration. In ‘Percusos’ artists researched, through interviews and recordings, the community. It uncovered the loss of festivities, the high rural suicide rate, and non-conformist individuals.

A hard-hitting but sometime humorous play resulted, relating the story of two old men who reminisce about playing together on chairs when they are young. At the end the two old men climb the chairs and hang themselves. This piece would work in other rural areas, outwith Portugal. The resources available were a dynamic, creative production team.

Why do it? What is it enabling us to do?

***“Such events enable us to keep living.”***

There was a deep sense from the community that their story was being told, that someone was listening, and that the repercussions would carry on long after the production.

**John MacGrath** is the Director of the new National Theatre of Wales (cf Vicky Featherstone) and previously directed the Contact Theatre in Manchester. Here he had three principles of creating a community venue:

**Reflect** the community in those who run it and the images used to label it. Make sure the community has helped deliver this back to themselves.

***“We balance the excitement of the new and the security of the known.”***

This allows community-based creativity. As an example he told us of some rap workshops organised in the space, John then found that for several weeks some the rappers had set up a ‘Freestyle Monday’ session round the back by the bins, where they met their friends, who they knew would not enter the building. Eventually this group was 40 strong and possibly alarming for passers.

***“The community might be alarmed by young Black men expressing themselves in poetry!”***

Eventually the leaders asked for an inside space and encouraged the group to come in. Success through leadership from within the community, not for the community.

**Re-image** the community. In a theatre space unexpected groups of people come together in unexpected ways. This can be manipulated (arranging interval times for radically different audiences at different shows so they mingle) or inadvertently - the ‘wrong’ audience getting involved in a foyer-based presentation.

***“All venues can be extraordinary social spaces.”***

**Challenge** Bring artists and audiences together to explore perceptions of each other.

**The National Theatre of Wales** will avoid presenting a retrograde examination of national identity but will start with a series of projects called ‘This Land’ that explores what it is like to be in Wales, a series of bespoke works relating to different sites. The NTS will debate and reflect on the social nature of community.

**Improvisations.**

***“Can theatre offer a ‘Rapid Response Unit’ to local and national issues?”***

John suggest that British theatre has managed to arrive at a norm of just the wrong amount of ‘cooking time’ for theatre – not short enough to be *‘a point’* and not long enough to coalesce beautifully – but at a central mushy par-boiled time!

## Break-out discussion

Do you have an audience for issue-based work? How do you take account of young people in theatre?  
Why do you want to do in anyway?

My session was attended by a group of 7 young people promoting events at Penrith High School, supported by the local touring scheme. Their biggest problem was in trying to sell an unknown show. An adult suggested they could see performers on You-Tube, and other sites.

***“but nothing beats see them live beforehand”*** said one wise young person. So much for adult presumptions about young folk and the digital age!

Issue-based theatre can produce a sense of ‘déjà vu’, eg ‘not another play on the Highland Clearances’. What are the perceptions about what is a local issue? Who decides? The audience or the company?

Is touring theatre like a circus arriving town?

***“A day of razzmatazz and all that is left is a pile of elephant poo!”***

Events in rural venues are far more likely to leave a last effect on the community.

Youth Idea – use your gap year to work on a culture based overseas project – are there any?

## Rural Events

IVOC arranged entertainment in village halls, up to 45 minutes away, even although some were for the IVOC audience only – for performers and delegates to get a taste of village hall promotion. It was fascinating to see how others do it – the recognisable local enthusiasm and village hall idiosyncrasies.

## Double concert in the Witham Hall, Barnard Castle

### ‘Frika’ Dance Norway

Five fine examples of Norwegian ego-filled testosterone – three dancers, 1 fiddler, 1 percussion.

***“Break dancing started in Norway over 100 years ago.”***

They call it ‘Frika’ – Freakers – a male wild dance style where each egg each other on in wild high kicks and dance. A good transition between tradition and contemporary. This sat wonderfully alongside the SA/UK crossover dance styles we saw earlier.

### Harald Haugaard, fiddle trio from Denmark

Another ego-filled trio and internationally known fiddler with a guitarist and percussionist, playing traditional tunes with jazz cross-over. The youth group sat in the front row: the boys being un-impressed and the girls filming Harald on mobiles! Then, shock, horror, he introduced his gorgeously beautiful Danish wife. Away went the mobiles, the girls took a sulk and the boys suddenly became very interested! The traditional love song she sang could easily have come from Aberdeenshire.

Harald played a tune from the Flensburg area – on the Danish-German border, an area whose inhabitants suffer from the warring follies of the powers on each side of them. As a result those people become really resilient – and culture gives people that self-confidence.

***“self-confident people are also open-minded people.”***

***“my grandfather offered me 10Kr when I was child to learn 2 difficult tunes, which I did. As always, funding is strong motivation in art.”***

Harald knows all the folk in Scotland – playing with Blazin Fiddles in Newcastle over Easter, Anna Massie etc – so we need to get him to play in the Highlands. He is promoted by Gordon Webber.

### Ro:toro - Estonia

We drove on to Mickleton Village Hall for an evening meal, an Estonian recipe and Estonian beer, before a full concert from Ro:toro, an Estonian bagpipe-led quartet, with guitar, saxophone and selection of percussion instruments made from washing up bowls upturned in larger bowls of water, wood strips and a bicycle wheel. All were young and had good English. The girl piper (with the drones hanging down by her waist) led the group which at times were indistinguishable from a Dick Lee/Hamish Moore set up.

***“Before mobile phones, Estonians used bagpipes to contact each other at a distance.”***

She also said that many Estonians did not realise that the pipes were also their national instrument. Music also included overtone flutes borrowed from Norway and made from roadside ‘flash-sticks’ – thin, hollow reflector poles. She also played ‘Jews harp’.

***“A whole village can dance to just one Jews harp!”*** (i.e. you don’t need to provide much for quality enjoyment)

## Thursday 2 April

### The International Festival Circuit

This session opened the doors and gave ideas for any of us to attend international festivals; see performers first hand and find bursaries to attend. Several NRTF members have regularly attended festivals in Europe and Canada over several years, resulting in many visits from international performers to the UK and this conference.

**Jorg-Rudiger Geschke**, Germany, is an inveterate festival attender, both as a promoter and as a traditional music Radio presenter, (which opens many doors!). Festivals included Folk Baltika in Flensburg (that border area mentioned by Harald last night); Kalustinen in Finland; Viljandi in Estonia; Lublollner near Hamburg in Poland; and Mollner in Hamburg. All were different in style, size and time of year. Another large event is the European Broadcasting Union Festivals, the next being 2010 in Cologne. All of IVOC visiting performers had resulted from visits to these places.

**Kevin Korchinski** of Saskatchewan, Canada, spoke about the wide variety of showcase events organised by the Regional Presenter Networks, an Autumnal month of events across Canada during which international performers play for free to get engaged by visiting promoters. Full details can be found via links in [www.osac.sk.ca](http://www.osac.sk.ca). Several NRTF folk had visited under the 'Trade Routes' funding schemes which unfortunately is discontinued.

Suggestion: There be an NRTF supported showcase of international theatre, on the lines of the Celtic Connections Showcase.

The European Shakespeare Theatre Festival network was flagged up.

### Making International Work a Reality

**Barbara Slack**. The Northern Touring Consortium is several northern NRTF schemes working together for 9 years. The benefits are

- Buying Power
- Increased Capacity
- Sharing Multi-skills
- Learning New Skills

Various members have visited festivals each year, especially Contact East - going to events in Newfoundland, PEI, Cape Breton and Vancouver, and meeting a great mix of professionals and volunteers.

***"Take a friend and just go."***

As a result 'Pavlo' from Newfoundland came to Somerset, and soon 'Moto O' Theatre will come from British Columbia. Others include 'Barachois', 'Theatre of Nerds', 'Polyjesters'; 'Chuck and Albert'.

In Vancouver they saw 'Linsay Pollack'; 'Vagabond Opera'; 'The Montreal Guitar Trio'.

The perceived joys for international visiting companies undertaking rural UK touring are that it allows them to get to know the country and be well looked after locally.

***"Once they have got round the idiosyncrasies of raffles and egg sandwiches, it is an excellent way to make a first visit."***

**Gail Ferrin**. A lively promoter with Lewis origins. She organised the visiting international events to IVOC and gave a lively non-digital presentation, getting folk to stand up with large letters:

- I = Interest and investment, which is not necessarily in money
- N = Networks
- T = Trust – in the network, the venue, the artist, the audience and the promoter.
- E = Experience and equipment
- R = be 'Really laid back' and also Risk; Risk Assessment and Recommendation
- N = New
- A = Additionality; Accommodation (eg who is responsible for days off)
- T = Tax and money issues
- I = Innovation; Insurance
- O = Online
- N = Nerves of steel
- A = Advertising, media and international paper size issues of media.
- L = Local context

## Comments

We sat in loose groups of around 15 people with some of the visiting band members to talk about touring issues for 15 mins – mostly us asking them about how prepared they felt about visiting UK.

***“In 1800s Poland received around 500 Scottish Farmers - there is still a Scottish diaspora”***

Harald the Dane got just as much buzz as playing in front of 10,000 at Cambridge Folk festival as in a lively small hall. On comparing small venues in UK and Denmark, he remarked:

***“The toilets are smelling just the same as back home!”***

## Break out Sessions – Sustainability

How can arts relate to issues of sustainability and global warming?

**Fiona Pelham** is from ‘Organise This Ltd’ [www.organisethis.co.uk](http://www.organisethis.co.uk). She is panel member and chair of BS8901, the British Standard for Sustainability in the arts. While this sounds a rather dry topic it is a basis on which all arts organisations can design aims that are sustainability and locally connecting.

**Lucy Neal** is an arts administrator who has recently set up Transition Town Tooting. This is part of the larger network looking ahead to life after ‘Peak Oil’ when the oil runs out.

***“Rather than wait for personal responses or government responses, this creates a community response.”***

The Transition programme is based on Relocation, Renewal and Resilience, through which a community can create an ‘Energy Descent Action Plan’ for a future, that is healthier, happier in a non-oil world, in a 12-point action plan. Lucy believes that the arts have an important place in this movement.

There was then an open chat on how this sort of conference might be different in 15 years. So of course a couple of aura-ridden delegates suggested we go and commune with nature by sitting outside on the damp grass. We must all slow down! Is the issue ‘no travel’ or ‘oil-free travel’? Nuclear energy is evil.

Whimsy set in, and all focus was lost!

## Evening show ~ Akseli Klonk, Finland

A totally remarkable piece of story telling with three brilliantly mad Finns – ‘The Three Brothers’ and ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears’, in front of an almost totally adult audience, but not at all patronising, over the heads of the children, nor under the radar of the adults. Great use of objects (hoover parts, two mandolins, the inside of a spin-drier, puppets and great sound effects. This certainly could not be British theatre! It was also good to be in a local village hall with all its delights and idiosyncrasies and a horde a great ladies making tea in the interval.

## Friday 3 April

At the morning welcome – a chocolate rabbit on all the front seats to encourage folk to move forward!

### Local NRTF case-studies

#### 'Singing out West'

**Ian Scott** of Dorset, spoke of a joint community singing project with promoters in Cornwall, Devon and Dorset, with 'Black voices' on UK and 'Mtiebi' a male choir from the Caucasus.

***"The physical presence of other cultures."***

***"I did not know there were so many notes you could sing"***

They created a very good video of the project –

***"Don't underestimate the importance of creating a 10-20 minute video:- for the record, for funding and for profile-raising."***

A full-time team of two were at the IVOC conference to make a 30 minutes video.

#### Kindergarden

A Shropshire-and-nearby-counties joint venture creating a festival of events for 'early years'. It started from a casual chat at a 'Take-Off' events when three touring-scheme folk:

***"found there was a community of interest and a willingness to work together."***

They contacted 'Imagine', the Scottish Children's theatre festival and 'Ciao' children's events in the south west, with the aim of building on these (i.e. taking advantage of companies already there!) They arranged 36 shows with 3 companies, for 823 adult and 2,655 children's tickets, an average of 96 per event; gate income of £7,250 for a budget of around £50,000 – an average cost of £14 a ticket.

It was really a series of events, but marketed very successfully as a festival, in one leaflet and simple connected marketing for all events. It managed to raise audience numbers and the profile of all the venues.

### International Practicalities

**Chris Wade** of Adastra and **Frank Wilson** of Stockton international Festival lead a practical workshop.

A PowerPoint sheet and questionnaire is attached.

#### Work Permits

Citizens of EC countries do not need Visas. Other work permits as we know them are now turning into 'Certificates of Sponsorship' (CoS)

**See [ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk)**

To support a visiting group the promoter must apply in advance to become a sponsor. This costs £400 and there are quite strict credentials, including the need for PANE reference numbers etc. This means that it is really impossible for individual promoters to get a CoS.

### Risk Assessment

Some areas need detailed risk assessment, and others do not. For example, musicians are safely on stage so in little danger! However jugglers; pyrotechnics, stilt-walkers all must have full cover.

European performers frequently have lower public liability insurance than is usual in the UK.

The onus is on you, the promoter, to ensure that artists insurance is up to scratch, or your public liability insurance might be invalidated.

For a Foreign visit you can take out public liability insurance on their behalf for a short term.

Criminal Records Bureau (SCRO in Scotland) checks – these seem to vary from local authority to local authority dependant on the officer in charge, and there seems to be a growing paranoia about it.

## Where do we go from here ~ Hot Topics

Delegates were encouraged to pin notes up with 'Hot Topics' that had come out of discussions, and ideas for the future. These were compiled overnight into 3 pages of notes (attached). We broke into four discussion tables and pulled out issues that attracted us.

1. How do rural festivals fit into NRTF? – not very much and similar to PAN
2. NRTF recognise that Rural Festivals are recipients of international touring; however Festivals can be difficult to work with as dates and events styles can be rigid.
3. Is folk music in England 'cool' – not generally except in the NE and SW. cf the Scottish situation?
4. Do we understand and value our own indigenous variety? Perhaps NRTF members can be encouraged to bring local showcases from their areas to NRTF central conferences.
5. How important are collaborations?

***“One of the most important ways we (touring schemes) should be going. Hard to do but a great way to change the way we work and run the network***

6. Technical issues are always considerable with international touring companies – such as providing suitable p.a. or getting international systems to work with UK power supplies.
7. We need more information about international artists already in the UK. Visiting Arts attended and now aim to work much more closely with Touring Schemes. They realise they are remarkably disconnected at present.
8. Visa issues are getting more constrained. See the comments above. Two folk at the conference sit on the Visa committee.
9. Language is a consideration – despite the high-quality of overseas English. There are issues of working with overseas performers and their ability to deliver an event, which is not too dependent on the home language.
10. How will extra international work impact on existing schemes?
11. Olympiad – a 'fund remover' or 'opportunity to work with local training camps around UK'?
12. 'Rapid Response' theatre should be encouraged.
13. How does this all relate to connections with young adult audiences?
14. How does one change touring from 'parachute work' to 'deep impact'.
15. Is there any silent racism in rural touring?

***“Please don't send any of them darkies to our hall.” !***

All presentations will be available on the IVOC website [www.nrtf.org.uk](http://www.nrtf.org.uk)

## Departure

The next NRTF Members meeting is 19 September 2009 in Decibel, Manchester.

## Thoughts for PAN

- ❖ PAN includes international work in its Development Plan to raise the profile of the Highlands and Islands for international work.
- ❖ PAN encourages internal co-operation amongst members for international visits.
- ❖ PAN works with NRTF and other touring schemes to collaborate in international events.
- ❖ PAN makes use of funding schemes to attend international festivals.
- ❖ PAN investigates takes on the role to provide 'Certificates of Sponsorship' for work permits.
- ❖ PAN encourages NRTF members in England and Wales to promote the wealth of talent from within Scotland.
- ❖ Individual H and I promoters can become associate NRTF members to receive all information direct.