



# UK Street Arts and mainland Europe

Opportunities and barriers to exploiting work from England in the rest of Europe

## **Background**

In January 2002 the Arts Council published a Strategy and Report on Street Arts (ISBN 0–7287–0867–1). In this document we restated our commitment to this broad area of activity stating that Arts Council England ‘values street arts in all its diversity and its importance within the wider theatre ecology. It recognises that practitioners need greater access to development funds to create work and strengthen infrastructure, networking and professional development opportunities’.

## **Definition**

In the strategy and report the Arts Council defined street arts as encompassing dance, music, circus, pyrotechnics, theatre, comedy and spectacle. It has a diversity of practitioners using many forms from situationist street theatre to samba musicians, to large-scale puppets, and it has been used as a form of political performance as well as a focus for participatory work.

Street arts takes place outside in sites that do not have the usual signifiers of a performance space, such as formal seating, lighting or staging. It takes places in streets, parks, shopping centres, and markets and can be site specific, ambulatory or static.

## **Research**

In November 2004 Arts Council England commissioned Anne Tucker to undertake a piece of research to be shared across the organisation examining the reasons why UK based street arts work does not get widely distributed across mainland Europe. These are the key findings.

There are over 300 street festivals in mainland Europe; many of them invite foreign companies – street arts often use non-verbal techniques to communicate with their audiences, enabling the shows to travel across language borders. However, proportionately few British groups ever get booked for any of these. The Arts Council is keen to seek out opportunities for more British groups to get work internationally, and therefore an assessment of the current barriers is useful.

## **Methodology**

Three questionnaires were devised; one for European Festivals that programme street arts; one for European agencies that represent street artists/companies; and one for British street performance companies, that have had bookings in Europe.

Working with colleagues from Spain, France, Germany, Holland and Belgium Anne Tucker developed a database of festivals with which to consult.

Questionnaires were translated into French and Spanish initially and subsequently a translation was made into Italian.

Questionnaires were followed up through contact with individual respondents, in order to compile a report for the Arts Council. This document draws together the key findings from this research. All quotations from respondents are unattributed.

## **Festivals**

Information gathered enabled comparison between:

- the budgets available for artists,
- the proportion of artists costs that are paid in full by festivals (which included information about 'in' and 'off' programmes, showcase and 'busking' opportunities),
- the proportions of different types of outdoor shows, by artform and by size.

Responses varied widely.

## **Scale and budget**

The budget for artists and companies is a useful indicator of the scale of festivals – this ranges from under 50,000 euros to over 1.5 million euros. Each country has at least one festival with a significantly higher budget than the rest; the best-resourced are spread across mainland Europe.

Festivals with the smallest budgets include all the Swiss and Italian festivals that responded (there were few completed questionnaires from Italian festivals with many of their directors explaining that they are unpaid volunteers)

Festivals vary widely in their selection of shows by price bands, the only common feature being that festivals with a budget of less than 50,000E rarely programme large scale work

There is no consistency whatever as to the range of costs they might expect to pay (in euros) for a 'small scale show' (from 150 to 8,000 euros), a 'middle scale show' (up to 15,000 euros) or a 'large scale show' (2,000 to 30,000 euros). *'We choose shows we want, rather than spending our budgets mathematically'*.

The art forms used vary widely. Of the festivals having an 'off' programme, the largest proportion of 'off' shows are circus. Very few festivals programme dance on stage; many do not have music on stage.

The majority of festivals (apart from self-defined 'markets', 'buskers festivals' or 'showcases') pay 100% of artists' costs for their main or 'on' programmes. British artists responded a little differently - 6 companies agreed 100%, the others said

that anything from 25% to 90% was common. However, artists did not differentiate between showcases and others.

The 'off' festivals range from paying nothing, to 'some' technical costs and accommodation/food, or a reduced fee and proportion of technical costs. Some have a flat rate payment (100 to 150 euros per person). Very few pay travel expenses. In some festivals 'off' performers can busk or 'hat'.

Several festivals say that they 'share travel costs on tour' – and imply later that they are more likely to take international artists coming in somewhere near, which lessens the burden of travel costs.

### **Employment of international artists**

Fifty-nine of the sixty-two festivals work with international artists, for reasons of cultural exchange and understanding, festival profile and prestige, lack of product at home, the need to have variety, the high quality of the best international work and encouragement from foreign governments / agencies.

The proportion of international companies in festival programmes varies widely, from 10–100%. In general, festivals in France use the lowest proportion of international artists and Belgian and Italian festivals the highest (the majority of those who cited 'lack of national artists' as a reason for using international groups come from these two countries).

There is no obvious correlation between well-funded festivals and the proportion of international artists they book

The amount of international work programmed by European festivals appears fairly stable over the last three years.

Companies and artists are employed from most European countries - France, Belgium, Germany, the UK, Holland, Italy and Spain are listed most often.

Over 50% of respondents cited high travel costs as the main disincentive to working with international artists; 42% cited language. Other reasons included 'quality of work', 'fee levels' and 'lack of information about foreign work available'.

Belgian, German and Dutch festivals are more likely to programme English language work than festivals in Southern Europe. It is noteworthy that agents (as opposed to festivals) responded that text was the disincentive for them. *'English humour is quite accessible and appreciated by European audiences but it must be linked to real visual skills, not to talking'*.

All festivals with no international programme stated that finance was an issue and suggested that sharing costs between programmers might be of benefit. Of the festivals with no international programme, one claimed a lack of information from international artists.

### **Mainland European festivals and UK based street arts companies**

Most respondents (83%) had seen a British company – although some were unable to specify.

Most festival directors travel widely to other festivals to see work (those that do not, are aware that they should, but do not have the resources). The big European festivals are frequently mentioned, and, in the UK, Brighton, Manchester and Stockton are known and visited. However, less than 50% of respondents have been to a UK festival, though all three agents have.

The UK based companies who responded concurred that they got more international bookings from being seen at European festivals than at UK festivals. Several felt that not enough international programmers looking for work come to UK festivals. They also said that recommendations by festival directors to each other often result in bookings.

Many of the most established UK based companies are named by mainland European programmers as being good and enjoyable. Only two respondents claimed not to like UK based work. The Belgians and Dutch gave the most positive responses to UK based work (citing the British sense of humour as a salient factor). French festivals seem to have the greatest difficulty with UK based work. *'The British aesthetic is very limited - in terms of what we understand by 'shows' in France. Very many animations rather than shows unfortunately'*.

Most established UK based companies had toured work internationally. Some festivals list up to 30 UK based companies which they have worked. Only three festivals have seen artists they liked and not booked them.

One agency has a number of UK based street companies on their books. All three agencies are keen to include UK based companies which work across mainland European contexts. UK based artists claim mixed success in getting bookings abroad from European agencies. The British Council has enabled several companies to work internationally (though this may include non-European countries).

Respondents listed a range of reasons for not booking UK based artists. Apart from discussions of the quality of work (see below), other responses included: finance (30%); *'not available on our dates'*; *'doesn't fit the concepts of our festival'*; *'lack of any information/knowledge of British groups'*.

More festivals seem have developed specific thematic strands, which means they only book work that fits within certain parameters.

The lack of certain types of work was considered a problem by some festivals – eg stilt theatre, large scale animated installations, affordable large-scale shows.

### **UK based respondents**

UK based respondents had mixed feelings about the usefulness of sending unsolicited company information. Some felt it is essential to send colour publicity (of the same high quality that European companies use); some said that publicity is only useful as a backup once work has been seen or recommended and is not a cost effective way to market themselves; some have done no international mailings, one has done one for the first time this year and is awaiting results.

Eleven UK based artists and companies responded that between 5% and 75% of enquiries from abroad result in bookings. Seven stated that the feedback was that their fees were too high; eight that travel costs were too high; four that their work had too much text; and six that dates didn't work. Several respondents claimed that mainland European festivals frequently have large provisional lists that are not confirmed until very late, due to late confirmation of sponsorship

Mainland European programmers made a number of suggestions to increase UK based artists and companies' bookings abroad: *'Britain changing to the euro'*; *'coping with our way of paying'*; *'British companies go through often very expensive European agents, that work in a very showbiz way. Could they direct*

*themselves directly to festival directors or small producers, who can set up mini-tours around their own dates? It's a bit more risky but often much more pleasant for both artists and organisers'.*

### **Artistic quality**

European programmers' principal reasons for not enjoying British work are: *'I do not like the visual aesthetic (design, set, props)' and 'Much of it is of poor quality'*

A number of people describe a perceived lack of resources available within the UK for making work, which can be seen in the quality of production.

Other comments include: *'lack of flexibility'; 'groups are missing a poetic dimension'; 'lack of interest [from British groups] in promoting their work abroad'; 'eccentric insularity'; 'lack of good quality large shows in England (because of the economic situation?) but the level of skill of actors in general is OK'; 'Groups need to be willing to co-operate with others'.*

There is a strong willingness from most respondents to find and book good British work. Programmers are keen to see more and hope that new and interesting shows will be made. Northern European countries expressed their enjoyment of the British sense of humour. Several festivals are at pains to say that UK based work is of no worse a quality than work from the rest of Europe.

### **UK based companies' knowledge of mainland European opportunities**

Research indicates that there is a lack of knowledge in the UK about mainland European street festivals and opportunities that could exist for street arts companies. UK artists and company approaches to internationally touring are largely haphazard and poorly researched. It is recommended that ISAN and USAN collaborate to provide information on international markets for members.

### **The Value of Showcases**

The research indicates that showcases such as Manchester xtrax and the Streets of Brighton play a major role in encouraging international programmers to the UK. Equally, large and established festivals such as Stockton (and increasingly Edinburgh and London) are attractive to international bookers. However, since over 50% of the festival respondents had never been to a UK festival, further work could be done to encourage more to visit.



Mainland Europeans do however visit other European festivals in very large numbers, so there is obviously the scope for British companies to be seen at these. However, there is rarely any payment offered to groups who are not part of the official programme, which makes attendance a highly risky financial venture, especially for larger shows.

UK based artists and companies took a positive view of showcasing opportunities both in the UK and in mainland European where fees and costs are paid.

**Other comments:**

*'In the UK there are not enough big street theatre festivals. When there are enough festivals or just one big festival people will come to those/ that festival to scout for their festival.'*

*'Britain in general is felt to be 'apart' from other European countries and this perhaps influences the arts as well'.*

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