

## SOPHIE MOTLEY PRESENTATION – THEATRE FORUM.

### WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE ART VERSUS THE FINANCE VERSUS THE SUPPORT...

Many regional Irish venues are underfunded and understaffed, but the chasm between independent professional artists making work in venues, and the direct support that they are getting from some venues is growing.

When you are salaried within an institution, it is difficult to see outside it, and when you are freelance and trying to work with an institution, it is difficult to understand the minutiae of how that institution works. This is what needs to be addressed. It can only work if it is an open and honest *collaboration* between artists and venues, and if the art comes before the money. **We are not just a product, we are a process.** And we need to talk about this.

I would like to open a conversation about the growing need for venues to work with professional/amateur companies of performers, and how this affects the general element of professionalism within the arts, particularly theatre.

The bigger question is, **do regional Irish audiences want professional theatre?** Are they more excited by amateur or amateur/professional or semi-professional performances? It certainly seems that productions like these bring in more audience numbers than contemporary independent theatre.

I would be fascinated to know how venues around the country find this. It is a very sad thing if the answer to this is no, audiences would rather see a semi professional show than a professional production. It would beg the question – why bother touring..

**Depending on whether this has been said already by Patricia -**

Although I work freelance as a theatre and opera director in the UK and Ireland, I am also co-artistic director of WillFredd Theatre. We make contemporary work that engages specifically with communities of space, place or interest whilst developing the work, and therefore endeavour to bring new audiences to our work as part of our practise. We've worked with and presented work for audiences from healthcare, the Deaf community, rural and urban agricultural communities, horse racing and botany communities. We've presented work alongside touring performances in theatres within a community setting, and we endeavor to engage with communities in the vicinity of every venue before and during a visit. We are currently planning a tour for 2016 which would see us presenting work both in a Hopsice setting and in a venue setting concurrently, and we have just toured Jockey to four venues and a racecourse!

The work we make is similar to Expert Theatre in that it is informed by experts, and produced and presented by us as professional artists endeavouring to remain scientifically and factually accurate with the presentation of the work. As such we bring a certain amount of inherent marketing support with us when we tour to venues in Ireland. However, we find that in some cases the community engagement element of our work is presumed as general marketing support for the venue, rather than something which is production specific. Our **process** of making work necessitates spending a long time developing work with audiences and groups of people. Work in progress showings are for the community as well as the development of the work, and are **not** part of a final 'product.'

There is an important conversation between artists and venues in Ireland which needs to be addressed. A lot of it, I believe, is to do with **mutual understanding and support for each others' practise and necessary limitations.**  
**LETS TALK ABOUT THIS!**

How do we move forwards? I think there are a few very clear and particular solutions to the engagement between artists and venues:

### **1) COMMUNICATION.**

This solves nearly everything. Effective communication can be as simple as an email saying "I got your message, I'll get back to you ASAP". Understandably, when artists are focusing doggedly on one project and venues are programming many in a week, communication can get difficult.

We need to define the nature of the collaboration **ARTISTICALLY** and **FINANCIALLY** between artists and venue at the beginning stage of the process.

### **2) TIME**

**PLANNING** engagement between venues and artists beyond simply programming, allowing long lead-ins to work, and ability to connect with local audiences. Giving artists practical and achievable deadlines for copy/image/brochures, bearing in mind that freelance artists and companies are usually working another job, and organising these things with little or no notice is difficult. We as artists also need to bear in mind that venues are understaffed and usually having to deal with the immediate and the imminent rather than the one down the road.

### **3) ENGAGEMENT and COLLABORATION**

From my end of things, theatre is a collaborative practice.

Having a conversation about the way each venue/artists particularly works prior to touring is a great lead-in. Who is in charge of what, how the venue likes to organise things, how the artist prepares. This is ESPECIALLY important when work is being made specifically for a venue.

The artist should engage with the venue before the performance. This should be a site visit as well as an audience visit. Venues and artists can easily collaborate together to set these up. It's important for both the artist and the venue to take the time to do this.

Venues should bring the artists out and introduce them to their audience. As our work is community specific, if every venue that we toured to set us up a meeting with one of their local communities, that would help the work and ultimately also the marketing and audience numbers.

#### **4) THE ART BEFORE THE MONEY**

This is the big one. We all know how important the financial is when planning engagement with artists and venues, but its important to remember that the art should always come first. Financial language needs to be utterly removed from the language around the work. It is of course important, but should not be prioritised. All too often it becomes about numbers. There is a larger conversation to be had here, as the nature of touring grant applications is numerical – it has to be financially worth supporting for the Arts Council.

#### **5) SUPPORT**

As artists, we are always going to be more vulnerable. Sometimes we just need a bit of love. Sometimes we just need someone to come into the venue while we are on hour 8 of a huge difficult fit-up and tell us how excited you are that we are in the building. It's as easy as that. It's not narcissism, its just that making work necessitates putting us in a vulnerable position. It really does MAKE OUR DAY when the venue comes in and cares about us and our work.

**NOW LET'S OPEN A CONVERSATION ABOUT THIS.**