

NEWS RELEASE – March 12, 2021

Rural Touring has not stopped despite the Pandemic **Rural touring sector continues to be creative during 12 months of lockdown**

As the anniversary of the first lockdown passes, and rural audiences remain to be forced to stay at home, artists, rural touring schemes and volunteer promoters have found ways to continue to entertain communities, outside of shows in their usual venues in village halls, pubs, libraries, and community centres. In the face of COVID-19 Pandemic, the rural touring sector used their close community connections and in-depth knowledge of the needs of their audiences and artists to pivot quickly and innovatively. They commissioned and delivered professional work, not just for the digital space, but they have found ways to reach those not able to get online.

This includes commissioned radio concerts, theatre on the back of lorries, commissioned video shorts, reimaged theatre online, artists partnered with community groups, hyper-local outdoor performance for micro audiences, building a symphony of the countryside, digital diaries, plays by phone, dramas by postcard, shared and posted equipment, the creation and distribution of wellbeing packs, drive-in events and so much more. Rural touring across the country has never been more innovative or creative.

Rural Touring Schemes and promoters have been quietly producing programmes with an aim to not shout about it as attracting large audiences to shows was not the desired intention. It has all been personally delivered for individual villages so they could maintain COVID Safe social distancing. Some shows were put on for 30 minutes on one village green then moved to do the same in the neighbouring community. The work has been for small and specific audiences to ensure the residences maintain access to high-quality cultural provision and all the community health and wellbeing benefits that go along with that.

Symphony of the Countryside, a short film collaboration, led by Rural touring Scheme Carn to Cove in Cornwall. It involved rural promoters and audiences across England, professional musicians, poets, plus amateur and professionally shot images of the British Countryside capturing the summer of lockdown. Arts Alive in Shropshire and Herefordshire launched Arts Alive on Wheels, touring small scale shows outdoors on the back of a lorry. Highlights across the north of England commissioned a series of special concerts, Highlights at Home, which aimed to cut through the digital divide, premiered on BBC local radio. Cheshire Rural Touring Arts supported Stute Theatre to develop a new piece of telephone theatre called 'You Don't Know Me But...' which was a 1-1 live 20 min piece of theatre down the phone incorporating a soundscape and music as well as a live performer. Take Art in Somerset has developed a new network called Totally Local, incorporating 14 outdoor performances in 6 villages.

"Artsreach (RT scheme in Dorset) has felt like a 'big hug' during the pandemic," says a Promoter on the south coast.

Spot On in Lancashire commissioned a season of video shorts. Black Country Touring hosted Zoom Café, an interactive show about the history of coffee and tea. Lockbusters, a series of film packs with a selection of themed DVDs, books and journals created by Live and Local across the Midlands was shared within rural and hard to reach communities. Online performances from the Rural Touring Dance Initiative have taken place, sharing contemporary dance commissioned specifically for rural audiences.

Dommy B, who produced a film with Spot On in Lancashire, says *"Being occupied with something creative and kind, has been awesome and very helpful on a personal level to my mental health"*.

As well as generating top-quality entertainment for audiences, rural touring schemes have also fought hard to continue to find ways to pay artists and freelancers. National Rural Touring Forum, the umbrella organisation for the UK's rural touring sector, diverted some of its Arts Council of England funding to help artists, schemes and promoters with extra support, advocacy and communications. It produced one of the biggest and most ambitious digital conferences in the performing arts sector throughout October 2020. Holly Lombardo, NRTF Director, says

"I cannot express how proud I am to be part of an organisation that supports such a resilient, caring, and innovative sector. I am blown away by the response our members have had in continuing to bring work to communities"

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- NRTF has 400 members ranging from rural touring schemes, artists, venues, promoters, festivals and arts organisations
- Across the UK there are currently 30-member rural touring schemes, 1,650 performing groups, 110,000 voluntary hours, 332,000 audience attendees and over £1,000,000 in box office sales.
- 9.5 million people, or 17.0 per cent of the population, lived in rural areas in 2018. (DEFRA March 2020)
- National Rural Touring Forum:

The National Rural Touring Forum is an organisation that networks, develops and supports the delivery of high-quality creative experiences across rural areas in the UK. The aim of the Forum is to strengthen and support rural communities to bring professional work to their venues.

NRTF members are made up of a national network of Rural Touring Schemes who programme menus of professional artistic events that tour in their region. We also have artist, venue, promoter, producer and festival members all promoting and developing professional work for rural settings.

www.ruraltouring.org

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