An evaluation of the inherent challenges for audience, promoter and company in rural touring.

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Rural touring theatre and New Perspectives Theatre Company represent a surprisingly under-documented sector of the theatrical community, taking cultural experiences to those who otherwise may not ever engage with the theatrical world. On their website, New Perspectives reveal the nature of their projects, stating 'Our work is made to tour, to fit into unlikely spaces and to meet disparate groups of people'.[1] Tilly Branson, a PhD research associate with the company, believes this flexibility is what makes New Perspectives so intriguing, stating how 'there are unique things about making this work'.[2] This is undoubtedly true, yet this use of 'unlikely spaces' to entertain 'disparate groups of people' also unearths some unique problems that face rural touring. In this essay, I will not be arguing that rural touring will inevitably fail because of these problems but, rather, I will be evaluating the problems that companies are likely to face when rurally touring, and trying to unearth the critical reasoning behind these issues, using New Perspectives as my main case study.

As illuminated in the statement above, one of the major challenges facing any rural touring company is their ability to 'fit into unlikely spaces'. These problems, arguably, manifest themselves in two different ways — firstly, through the physical limitations of the space and, secondly, through the associations that this space may have in the community. Branson stated that 'Every space you go into every night will be different',[3] presenting huge problems for the actors and the company who have to set up the space and accommodate themselves with the space in a very short period of time.

However, it is this idea of associations that I want to focus on, tying into Marvin Carlson's idea of the 'haunting' of space through its 'preservation and configuration of cultural memory'.[4] In specific relation to ideas of rural touring, Carlson writes that

> Even when locations have been selected primarily because they were the most convenient or most available public spaces for performance, they were necessarily to some degree ghosted in the minds of the public that came there by whatever psychic or semiotic role that the space played in the normal course of events.[5]

This idea of the 'normal course of events' could be read as 'communal life', and this is something that Hamilton and Scullion noted in their study of rural touring in Scotland,

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[1] New Perspectives Theatre, http://www.newperspectives.co.uk/?idno=4.
[2] Tilly Branson, 'New Perspectives Theatre Company', in *Contemporary Performance Seminar Session* (University of Nottingham, 06/11/2013).
[3] Ibid.
[4] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre As Memory Machine* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 132.
[5] Ibid, p. 134.

stating that the use of these communal spaces encouraged 'a high degree of recognition and familiarity for audiences'.[6] Yet, this audience 'recognition and familiarity' poses a direct problem to rural touring companies due to their lack of knowledge of the space, meaning they are unaware of the connotations that these spaces hold in relation to the community and, more importantly, the connotations that these spaces will draw for their audience. This challenge is something that Branson is fully aware of, stating: 'do we want to embrace the village hall or do we want to disguise it?'[7] Ultimately, however, this decision to disguise or not within the performance may be somewhat irrelevant, as the space is not haunted by theatrical conventions but by specific social ones. Whilst haunting can undoubtedly be used to work in the favour of performance, the fact that New Perspectives are not members of this community will mean that their knowledge of the space in 'the normal course of events' does not align with the community it performs in and, hence, they are likely to be unable to utilise this haunting for positive effect.

This, in part, is why New Perspectives utilise volunteers in their touring programme, as they recognise the 'normal course of events' of their community and, hence, are more likely to know which shows will work in these spaces and for their community. However, this can also pose problems for rural touring companies as 'you're relying on that promoter [being] representative of that community'.[8] The issue with this assumption is something that Susan Sulieman explicitly refers to, stating that 'It seems especially difficult to expect such a claim without considering the possibility of *different* horizons of expectations co-existing among different publics in any one society'.[9] As Susan Bennett says, 'there is always a diversity of publics' and the danger of using a single volunteer as representative of an entire theatrical community is that this diversity may be hampered by the tastes of an individual.[10]

Catherine Love, in her article for *The Guardian*, reflects this difficulty when she says that touring companies are 'struggling to reach and engage with audiences through the current touring model'.[11] Whilst New Perspectives may well be constantly engaging with an audience, there seems to be a problem for them in engaging with the entirety of the community that they are performing to due to their reliance on the volunteer. Branson stated that her average volunteer was 'white, female and fifty plus', meaning that their shows are increasingly targeted at this demographic as these volunteers select what shows go on in their community.[12] New Perspectives, arguably, see themselves as having no choice but to target this demographic, as 'without the time and resources to build a deeper engagement with local audiences, touring companies demand even more risk on the part of the audience than their building-based counterparts'.[13] Hence, to offset this risk, rural touring may be seen to rely on shows that target traditional rural touring audiences, such as the over-fifties and families, tying into Richard Schechner's idea that 'The theatre follows the path of least resistance to its audience and even programs its campaigns to reinforce old patterns of theatre attendance'.[14] As rural touring companies are forced to try and sell their shows to others, this 'path of least resistance' is often chosen to ensure economic success. However, this may come at the expense of targeting a divergent audience and the company's artistic creativity, meaning that companies may find themselves constantly selling the same type of shows to the same type of audience, potentially neglecting new audiences in the process.

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[6] Christine Hamilton and Adrienne Scullion, *The Same, But Different, Rural Arts Touring in Scotland: The Case of Theatre* (Stroud: Comedia, 2004), p. 52.
[7] Branson.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Susan R. Sulieman, 'Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism', in *The Reader in the Text*, ed. Susan R. Sulieman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: PUP, 1980), p. 37.
[10] Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A theory of production and reception*, 2nd edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), p. 94.
[11] Catherine Love, 'Touring theatre: a risky business for audiences too?', *The Guardian* (18/07/2013).
[12] Branson.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Richard Schechner, quoted in Bennet, p. 112.

This negligence comes in part from the inevitably social aspect of the role of the community volunteer. Branson openly admits that her volunteers enjoy their role with the company as 'part of their social life', and this tension between the informal social volunteer and the professional company is potentially another issue with rural touring.[15] In their discussion on the use of volunteers in the arts, Helen Bussell and Deborah Forbes state that 'The most frequently cited source for volunteering is word of mouth', once again tying into this social sphere.[16] Yet, this 'word of mouth' marketing inevitably means that there's a risk that certain audiences are coming 'because the promoter is only inviting their kind of peer group', meaning that (even if companies did make new shows for new audiences) the promoter may only be encouraging certain people to come see the shows.[17]

However, this social challenge extends to the selection of the pieces of theatre as well as the marketing of these pieces. Bussell and Forbes reinforce this message when talking about the benefits of volunteering for these companies, stating that 'These benefits are often intangible and so the relationship becomes the crucial element with the social rewards becoming most valued for the volunteer'.[18] This valuation may well pose the greatest benefit to the volunteer, but the valuation of the social over the theatrical may pose the greatest threat to the company. Undeniably, theatre is always a social event, with John McGrath stating 'when we discuss theatre, we are discussing a social event, and a very complex social event'.[19] The difference with rural touring is that this 'social event' becomes mounted on the shoulders of the individual volunteer. Carlson talks of the haunting of the body in relation to the actor, arguing that they may 'evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made an impression on the audience, a phenomenon that often colours and indeed may dominate the reception process'.[20] Yet, in rural touring this haunting of the body may be equally applicable to the volunteer, who carries with them the associations of all the shows they have brought to their community. In their study of Scottish rural touring, Hamilton and Scullion quote a volunteer who perfectly embodies the social repercussions that volunteers live with, stating: 'Basically, if people go away happy then that's wonderful. If it's rotten I'll go away and hide 'cos I get it in the neck'.[21] Certainly, 'rural promoters live in a very public way with the consequences of what they promote' and, accordingly, this may lead them to take fewer risks in the work that they choose.[22] Moreover, if a volunteer does happen to select the wrong show, this can have a directly negative effect both socially on the volunteer and on the company, with members of the community now thinking they 'might not come to the next show because they've lost trust' in the volunteer.[23] Hence, not only does this social reputation effect the volunteer, but it also effects New Perspectives, as they are tied up in the social perception of the volunteer and, hence, they have to deal with the repercussions of placing their faith in that volunteer.

Finally, rurally touring theatre poses a far different type of social event to that located in traditional theatre spaces, as the space of the village hall is connected with ideas of communal gatherings and social events. This idea is discussed at length by Susan Bennett, who argues that 'The small groups of people who come to the theatrical event are deliberately assembled as a collective in a space which has, in its historical development, increasingly been designed to permit social display'.[24] Arguably, we also get this in traditional theatre

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[15] Branson.
[16] Helen Bussell and Deborah Forbes, 'Volunteer Management in Arts Organisations: A Case Study and Managerial Implications', *International Journal of Arts Management*, 2:9 (Winter 2007), p. 6.
[17] Branson.
[18] Bussell, p. 6.
[19] John McGrath, *A Good Night Out*, 2nd edn. (London: Nick Hern, 1996), p. 5.
[20] Carlson, p. 8.
[21] Hamilton, p. 45.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Branson.
[24] Bennett, p. 130.

spaces where the foyer is designed as a space 'to permit social display'. However, unlike in traditional theatre spaces where the foyer is separate from the stage, the space of the village hall has no foyer, merging the space of 'social display' with the space of theatrical display, and eroding the traditional distance between the social and theatrical spectacle. The potential issue for this stems from the relationship between the actor and the audience, with audience members considering the actors as part of this 'collective'. This is something that Branson mentions when she says 'you're all sharing the hall [in] proximity, so they're much more like to tell you [what they think]'.[25] Apparently, it is not uncommon for actors to be directly confronted during intervals by members of the audience and, whilst this may lead to high-praise or negative criticism, it is far removed from the traditional space of theatre, and an inherent challenge of rural touring which actors must accept.

To conclude, there seems to be three main challenges facing companies when making rural touring. Firstly, the use of communal spaces inevitably means companies must face the 'haunting' of these locations, and the challenges of the audience's preconceptions, whether known or unknown. Secondly, companies are entirely reliant on volunteers to resemble the demographic of their communities and sell the show to the correct members of that community. Finally, companies must be aware of the social aspect of community theatre, both in the way that volunteers target their audiences and the subsequent interactions between actor and audience.

The work of Geese Theatre Company and Augusto Boal

In his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal talks of his theatre as having the following key aim: 'How can one, starting with the actual image, arrive at the ideal image?'[26] This use of theatre to initiate improvement is also the drive behind Geese Theatre Company, with Louise Heywood (Geese's deputy artistic director) presenting three words as defining Geese: 'choice, responsibility and change'.[27] Hence, this essay will explore how the principles of Boal manifest themselves in the work of Geese.

Boal continually stresses the importance of image in his work, stating that 'The image synthesizes the individual connotation and the collective detonation'.[28] This focus on the image is also seen in Geese through their use of mime, with Heywood justifying this technique through explaining 'that watching in silence allows the observer to fill in the dialogue themselves and to imagine the tones of voice and the mood of the scene'.[29] Hence, both Boal and Geese can be seen to give the impetus of performance to the spectator, allowing them to define the scene in their own terms and, hence, make the scene more relatable to their own circumstances.

This recognition of the spectator with the actor is something that both Boal and Geese deem fundamental to their theatre. Boal famously created the concept of the spect-actor, allowing audience members to 'practice a real event even though he does it in a fictional manner' and, hence, motivating the individual to go out and change.[30] Geese continue this idea of the active spectator but, as Heywood asserts, 'we can work at one step removed'.[31] By this, Heywood means that Geese create characters that the audience can identify with as exactly like themselves but, crucially, not themselves, giving them the objectivity to pass judgement. This is a sentiment found in the *Geese Theatre Handbook* where it reads:

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[25] Branson.

[26] Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), p. 136.

[27] Louise Heywood, 'Geese Theatre Company', in *Contemporary Performance Seminar Session* (University of Nottingham, 04/12/2013).

[28] Boal, p. 138.

[29] Heywood.

[30] Boal, p. 141.

[31] Heywood.

'Audience members can experience the moral dilemmas faced by these characters, and then relate them to their own lives, at their own pace'.[32]

Crucially, it is this ability of the audience to use these sentiments at 'their own pace' which radiates through both Boal and Geese. Heywood repeatedly reiterated the idea that through her sessions people can practice laying the foundations for dealing with life after their present difficulties, giving them preparation to 'arrive at the ideal image'. This idea also lies at the heart of Boal, who says 'The experience is revealing on a level of consciousness, but not globally on the level of action. Dramatic action throws light upon real action. This spectacle is preparation for action'.[33] Hence, both Boal and Geese are hoping that their theatre is 'revealing' for their spectator, allowing them to find recognition of themselves and, in time, use this spectacle to take their own action.

The University of Nottingham's 'Haunting' of Lakeside Arts Centre and its Marketing

Sofia Nazar-Chadwick, Lakeside's marketing manager, has created the following definition for her marketing packages: 'Lakeside is the University of Nottingham's unique public arts centre and museum'.[34] Emphasising the intrinsic link between the two organisations, Nazar-Chadwick's definition lends itself to consideration in light of Marvin Carlson and his ideas on the 'haunting' of space.

Carlson states that spaces can become 'already layered with associations before they are used for theatrical performance' and, arguably, this is something affecting Lakeside.[35] As a subsidiary organisation to the University of Nottingham, Lakeside must adhere to the design briefs laid out by the university's guidelines, placing it under this educational umbrella and associating it with this educational frontier before being 'used for theatrical performance'.

Nazar-Chadwick states that her primary goal as marketing manager is to 'know her audience', yet this dialogue is constantly 'haunted' by the brand of the university.[36] Not only does this make it harder for Nazar-Chadwick to 'know her audience' but it makes it harder for her audience to know her, and exactly what Lakeside provides. She states that 'Individuality sells, but there's not always room for individuality' and it appears that this artistic liberalism, this freedom for individual marketing which would allow an honest dialogue with her audience, has been sacrificed in favour of a corporate model that detracts from Lakeside's artistic merit.[37]

Furthermore, and focusing on Carlson's ideas surrounding space, Lakeside also becomes 'haunted' by its location on University Park Campus. Carlson states that 'An audience not only goes to the theatre; it goes to the particular part of the city where the theatre is located'[38] and that the audience is 'conditioned in their response to theatre by the memories and associations of that location'.[39] Undeniably, the University of Nottingham's main campus carries with it these connections of education and institutionalisation which its universalised style of branding also exhibits. Moreover, Nazar-Chadwick argues that some of Nottingham's population don't believe they can come onto the university's campus, perceiving it as separate to the public space of the city and, instead, a place purely for the city's educational elite, continuing to hamper the reputation of Lakeside.[40]

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[32] *The Geese Theatre Handbook*, ed. Clark Baim, Sally Brookes and Alun Mountford (Hook: Waterside Press, 2002), p. 22.

[33] Boal, p. 155.

[34] Lakeside Arts Centre, http://www.lakesidearts.org.uk [Date Accessed: 30/12/2013].

[35] Carlson, p. 133.

[36] Sofia Nazar-Chadwick, 'Lakeside Arts Centre', in *Contemporary Performance Seminar Session* (University of Nottingham, 16/10/13).

[37] Ibid.

[38] Carlson, p. 140.

[39] Ibid., p. 156.

[40] Nazar-Chadwick.

However, these geographical limitations are physical as much as they are psychological. This perception of Lakeside is also based purely on the geography of Nottingham, as Lakeside is separated from Nottingham's theatrical centre at the heart of the city, where both Nottingham Playhouse and Nottingham Theatre Royal reside. Instead of its 'conditioned response' being connoted with this theatrical genre, Lakeside has 'memories and associations' of students and education, detaching it entirely from this theatrical world. Nazar-Chadwick explains that Lakeside's typical audience member is 'white, middle-class, with 2.4 kids', standing completely at odds with the University of Nottingham brand and its student campus, complicating any marketing strategy Lakeside may have.[41]

2Magpies and 'site-responsive' theatre

2Magpies, an emerging, Nottingham-based theatre company, define themselves in the following way: 'We create new and exciting devised performance in unique site-responsive locations in Nottingham and beyond'.[42] Arguably, it is the 'site-responsive' nature of their theatre that 2Magpies pride themselves on, with Tom Barnes (one of 2Magpies' co-founders) stating 'We have ideas all the time, for different productions or we're suddenly inspired by a location'.[43]

Certainly, it is this location-fuelled theatricality which shines through in their productions, most clearly in *Serenade* — a piece of theatre set in Antalya, a Nottingham restaurant, over dinner. Judith Rugg, in her text *Exploring Site-Specific Art*, writes of how 'the performance of space and place is determined through variations of normalized codes of behaviour' and, arguably, *Serenade* focuses its performance around the performed 'codes of behaviour' of the restaurant.[44] True to their 'site-responsive' ethos, 2Magpies interestingly sacrifice their own control to embrace the space's performance, with Matt Wilks (the second half of 2Magpies) stating 'We've deliberately not controlled the kitchen, so the performance could reach a really emotional point and the waiter could appear with a plate of food, which will have to be conventionally received with thanks, before the drama continues'.[45] Wilks' idea that 'the drama continues' is one that, I believe, misses the point, as the drama never stops. The waiter's introduction to the scene serves to thrust them into the role of the performer, changing the role of the actors (at least momentarily) into merely customers of the restaurant and, hence, effectively spectators. Therefore, in their 'conventionally received' thanks, the actors of *Serenade* may halt their devised performance, but this is only to take up a 'site-responsive' performance as restaurant customers.

This blurring between performer and spectator is also challenged in *Serenade* through the more intimate role of the audience. When talking about his actors and their characters, Wilks declared 'They're not playing characters, they're playing versions of themselves' because 'you react to your own name in a certain way you don't get with playing characters'.[46] As 2Magpies is created by university students starring university students, the audience is most likely to be comprised of people who know the actors involved. Hence, by keeping their own names, and manipulating their own personal histories into the show, 2Magpies reflect the intimacy of their location in the intimate connection the performers draw with the audience.

This connection is also something mentioned by Ginny Lee, one of *Serenade*'s actors, who says '[The audience] won't just recognise the situation they'll be experiencing it too'.[47]

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[41] Ibid.

[42] 2Magpies Theatre, http://www.2magpiestheatre.co.uk [Date Accessed: 31/12/2013].

[43] Annelies Baneke and Lauren Wilson, 'Impact is Serenaded by 2Magpies', *Impact Magazine* (27/03/2013) http://www.impactnottingham.com/2013/03/impact-is-serenaded-by-2magpies/ [Date Accessed: 31/12/2013].

[44] Judith Rugg, *Exploring Site-Specific Art: Issues of Space and Internationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p. 3.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

Once again, this returns to Jugg's idea of 'performances of the everyday' as, effectively, the show's acting is no different to the show's spectating, with both parties ordering and eating food, having conversations over their dinner and listening to their surroundings. Hence, through the performative aspect of the actions of the restaurant space, 2Magpies not only provide audiences with a piece of performance but, potentially, makes them realise that they are creating performance too.

Nick Wood's *A Girl With a Book* and the ideas of Howard Barker

On the website for his new play *A Girl With a Book*, Nick Wood discusses his motivations for writing his piece, explaining, 'When I heard the news in October 2012 that Malala Yousafazi and two friends were shot on the way home from school, I wanted to find a way to respond to this senseless and cruel act'.[48] This theatrical social awareness is something Howard Barker opposes, arguing that people are 'turning theatre into sticking plaster for the wounds of social alienation' and destroying the very essence of theatre: the fact that it is not true.[49]

Arguably, Barker's ideas do find radiance in Wood's work. Barker argues that shows which '[oblige] an audience to engage in a debate on the so-called issues the production had raised' succeed only in 'eliminating the entire experience of drama [and humiliating] the text by using it as a means to an end'.[50] This sacrifice of theatrical spectacle in favour of social poignancy could be attributed to Wood, with his director Andrew Breakwell even arguing that the piece acts primarily as a 'hook' to 'get people talking about education'.[51] This clash with theatrical form is also something Wood faced when creating *A Girl With a Book*, alluding to his struggle to turn the piece from 'a lot of organised rants' into a piece of theatre.[52] Barker may even argue Wood has failed to bridge this gap, leaving us with these 'organised rants' that resemble a lecture more than a piece of theatre.

This focus on the social is something Wood even mentions as an inherent difficulty with his piece, where his desire to question the audience's assumptions about Malala's story is offset by a danger of assuming common knowledge about the event. Barker writes that 'The moment that an action on stage asserts its veracity by reference to known and proven action elsewhere, theatre is overwhelmed by the world'.[53] Arguably, Wood's piece is 'overwhelmed' by the world in two ways, running the risk of falling into the shadow of a major social news story, and potentially isolating audience members due to their lack of knowledge of the events.

Yet, in terms of Barker's motivation for theatre, Wood can arguably be seen to adhere to his philosophy. Barker writes that 'in writing for myself I also served others'.[54] This focus on the personal is something also found in Wood's motivations behind *A Girl With a Book* when he says 'I carried on because I wanted to work through all the attitudes and prejudices it stirred up within me that I was so anxious to deny'.[55] Wood's personal feelings evidently fuelled his passion for his piece, rather than a desire to teach the world and, hence, it could be argued that Wood's service to his own emotions will cause it to successfully, and theatrically, serve others, just as Barker suggests.

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[48] Nick Wood, 'A Girl With a Book', http://agirlwithabooknickwood.com [Date Accessed: 31/12/2013].
[49] Howard Barker, 'Theatre Without a Conscience (1990)', in *Modern Theories of Drama*, ed. George W. Brandt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 56.
[50] Ibid, p. 58.
[51] Nick Wood and Andrew Breakwell, 'Theatre As Social Action', in *Contemporary Performance Seminar Session* (University of Nottingham, 13/11/2013).
[52] Ibid.
[53] Barker, p. 56.
[54] Ibid, p. 59.
[55] Wood.

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