

## Rural Arts Creative Case NORTH Bursary Case Study Report



Rural Arts provides arts engagement opportunities to rural communities throughout North Yorkshire and East Cleveland, based at The Courthouse in Thirsk and delivering the rural touring scheme ON Tour.

ON Tour works with small venues and volunteer promoters to bring performances to rural audiences. There is a lesser quantity of avid theatregoers rurally due to a smaller population, therefore promoters require programming that attracts a universal audience.

The bursary explored:

- how ON Tour can increase its programming of ethnically diverse performance companies.
- how venues and diverse companies can build successful working relationships
- how two key audience segments will relate to this new creative offer.

## The Activity

Rural Arts delivered two performance showcase and consultation events, with 30 young people in a school setting and a predominately older village hall audience of 55. Both groups observed The Chef Show by Ragged Edge Productions, a performance specifically created for rural touring about the heritage of Bangladeshi and Indian residents who own Indian restaurants in rural communities.

The show was followed by a facilitated discussion aimed at the two target groups. Young people were asked about their experience of attending shows, and their understanding of the context of the piece, whereas the village hall audience gave feedback on the performance model, the barriers for promoters, and whether audiences would be interested in the show.

## Learning and Insight

### “Stories are stories”

Our promoters unanimously agreed that they thought the performance was high-quality and that they would book the show. We have previously included diverse performances as part of the scheme and been unsuccessful with acquiring venues for dates: we no longer believe that this is due to diversity as one promoter pointed out that if a performance were high-quality it would be booked regardless.

Promoters and audiences voiced that they are interested in a range of performances, but at the heart of success is how the performance material is created and delivered, rather than the subject matter. In addition, promoters and young people felt that the promotional material and methods of promotion were crucial in gaining interest.

Promoters and audiences particularly enjoyed the interaction aspect of the piece, which includes a live cooking demonstration. The model of the inclusion of a “bridge” or interaction supports the performance to become more accessible and potentially easier to promote.

### Low Arts Engagement of Young People

Out of 30 Year 9 participants, only five had witnessed a performance, with none of the students seeing a show in a local community centre or village hall. The students engaged well and enjoyed the piece, they understood the context and could see the relevance of this performance touring to rural areas.

The school is situated in a small town where there is little diversity, and students are only exposed to diversity through the media. The nearest theatre is in Stockton, York or Leeds. Although the young people informed us that they were very infrequent

## Creative Case NORTH



theatre attenders and would not go to performances in village halls, they indicated that the best way to engage with them and their peers would be to take theatre directly into schools to develop young people as an audience.



## Impact

### Showcasing is key

Showcasing has proved to have the greatest impact in challenging promoter perceptions. Seeing a performance allows promoters to engage with the subject and talk about their experience with enthusiasm. Audience feedback indicated that promoters' enthusiasm and confidence must be authentic to sell the show to them in the first instance and promoters also felt that by meeting performers and discussing the concept of the show immensely impacted their view of the work.

To increase programming of diverse work we will be offering every diverse performance company we plan to work with an opportunity to showcase to our promoters prior to booking the show.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

## **Referencing Performances as Diverse is a Barrier**

The participants considered the performance to be appropriate for all possible audiences, and agreed that with the correct marketing techniques many people would attend and enjoy the show. They informed us that labeling the performance as diverse disengaged them from the piece, and that if you promoted the show as specifically about Indian heritage a smaller audience would attend. Therefore, marketing should concentrate on elements such as the writing, comedy/tragedy, and unique selling points etc.

The audience and promoters both agreed that racism did exist in rural communities and must be challenged, however, diverse shows should sit alongside the ON Tour programme and not be pigeonholed. Promoters indicated that their only motivation was to bring a great performance to their community, although they did admit that none had ever previously considered booking a show that was ethnically diverse.

The showcasing had certainly served as an awareness-raising event for both promoter and audience alike and gave both the opportunity to discuss together the lack of diversity within rural touring and how important it was to show this work in their community. All promoters felt that it had given them the confidence to consider booking diverse work including The Ragged Edge production.

## **Not Enough Choice!**

One of the main issues raised is that there is not enough diverse performance work available to tour rurally and none of the venues present had booked an ethnically diverse performance through either Rural Arts or direct with a company in the last 3 years.

Currently Rural Arts is experiencing a low amount of readily available performances to book. Rural touring relies on performances with a small cast, that are not too expensive to tour; selection is based upon personal and press reviews and minimising risk of low attendance.

Staff view a great deal of touring work and are struggling to find diverse performance companies that are touring a piece that is logistically suitable for rural touring. To tackle this issue we are planning to develop specific programming that supports ethnically diverse performance companies to tour rurally and support more companies to do this.

Sophie Backhouse April 2016