



Deciding to tour

Say you're a playwright, choreographer, or musician. Your work has just opened at a small venue and it's a hit. How can you share your work with the rest of the country? A nationwide tour... your name in lights from Kaitaia to Bluff?

Performing a season of your work before taking it on the road can be a good test of its marketability but it's by no means a foolproof method. Nor is it always an option. So how do you know if you should tour? There are a number of questions to consider.

Do you have the knowledge to mount and produce a tour? This means the ability to produce budgets, manage cash flows, seek sponsorship and grants, prepare, negotiate and implement contracts, negotiate royalties, rights and acknowledgments, mediate disputes, etc. If the answer to this question is no, you will need to find a producer.

Most producers worth their salt will want to see the show on stage before agreeing to produce a tour for you. It's a good idea if your show is a hit, or even if you think it's going to be a hit, to approach a producer and offer tickets. How do you find a producer? The easiest method is to ask around within the industry or try contacting service organisations such as Dance Aotearoa New Zealand (DANZ), Playmarket or the Centre for New Zealand Music (SOUNZ) (refer Service organisations, page 223).

You can find a producer, or you can produce a tour yourself. If you do choose this route, please try to find someone willing to be an advising producer (resource person) and/or oversee operations. It is important in this situation that both parties understand what is expected of them. A thank-you gift or an offer of payment to the producer is an appropriate acknowledgment of the fact that they will have worked hard to gather a wealth of information on touring.

Taking advice from an experienced producer right at the beginning will help you formulate a strategic overview for your tour. The kinds of questions you might discuss are: What are you trying to achieve with your tour? Are you trying to develop an audience for this and other works? Maintain an existing audience? Break the work in for potential international touring? What is the long-term value of this tour for your company (even if your company is just you)? Which towns

should you play? Are some worth playing before others to build word of mouth or because they're known for good audience attendance? How long should you stay in each place?

It's well worth taking the time to discuss such issues. The most successful touring companies have very clear business plans with strategic goals and outcomes clearly identified. Every tour they do is geared towards these goals. And you don't have to be the size of the Royal New Zealand Ballet to do this. The theatre company Indian Ink started out with one small show, *Krishnan's Dairy* – a small touring show with just three people on the road. But they had a very clear plan. Their aim was to develop a trilogy; each work would be researched and developed independently, mounted, toured nationally, then toured internationally.

Successful touring is all about planning.

Research

What is your product?

This is the next question to consider. You may find it hard to think of your work of art as a product in the marketplace. However, it's a useful exercise to disengage yourself from emotional connections to your work and assess it from a hard, commercial perspective.

So define your product. What is the nature of your show? Are the performers complete unknowns, or are there a few marketable names in there? Is there anything potentially slanderous, libellous, or offensive in the performance? How is your product positioned in the marketplace in relation to other performing arts companies? (For further information on this, refer to page 107.)

Who is your audience?

Who's coming to see your show? Are they 60 years and over, in the 40-60 or 30-40 age group, or all under 30 years of age? What socio-economic bracket would you place them in? Are they all women or all men? Samoan, Pākehā or Māori? What did the critics say about

the production? What did you overhear audience members saying to each other?

What about the practical details?

At this point it's important to be very specific. How large and awkward is your set? Will it last beyond this season? Is the work suitable for adaptation to different venues, or is it site-specific? How many are in the cast, or performance ensemble? Are they all available? Will anyone have to be recast? Have any of them toured before? How well do they get on with each other? Is the lighting design simple or complex? How does the sound work? Did you remember to clear the rights to use that Dave Dobbyn song?

Decision time

Once you've clearly assessed your product and its positioning, you will have a better idea of its potential as a touring work. In the end, there's no magical formula, but these following examples give you an idea of the different challenges involved.

There's no set to speak of: it's a chair we found in an op shop. The costume is a tee-shirt and jeans. There's only one actor, she's definitely developing a profile (successful previous show, bit of television), and she's keen and available. In terms of theatres, it requires a space about 5 metres by 5 metres. In fact, I've seen her do it in an office with no lights and the writer operating the sound, and it looked good. The show sold out and we extended the season by a week. That sold out too. The age of the audience ranged from 15 to 70; they seemed to come from a pretty broad socio-economic group; and had a good mix of male and female. The work is well-written – sexy, funny, poetic – with broad appeal. The critics loved it and the audience queued up to get her autograph at the end of the show.

This has 'tour' stamped all over it. It's a description of *No. 2*, written by Toa Fraser and performed by Madeleine Sami. If your defi-

dition sounds like the following description, then you're faced with a much tougher decision.

The set weighs three tonnes, is about 30 cubic metres and takes two seven-tonne trucks to move it around. There are 31 people in the cast and crew, a mixture of knowns and unknowns. It hasn't had a season yet. It will need about eight weeks to create, and then it will fit only four venues and we can afford to do only nine performances. It's a new contemporary New Zealand dance work with a bit of singing and speaking thrown in. It involves the works of some New Zealand icons and it's a bit difficult to describe what it's about in a paragraph but it covers religion, poetry and immigration. We think it will appeal to contemporary dance fans, opera lovers, fans of the New Zealand icons and theatre-goers. Socio-economics: mid to upper range. The last show by this artist was a solo work, which did really well on a national tour but the works before that were a bit of a mixed bag in terms of financial success.

This is a description of *Jerusalem – A Dance Opera*, choreographed by Michael Parmenter with music composed by David Downes. On the face of it, you'd have to be insane to want to go ahead. However, the tour did go ahead. It sold out and received standing ovations, tears, demands for autographs and a flood of letters – for all of its nine performances. It involved substantial funding from Creative New Zealand, good sponsorship in cash and kind, and a great team of highly skilled, experienced and dedicated people. Against very high odds, it worked.

However, it was a major risk. And that's the ultimate art to deciding whether or not something will work on the road. Know your product inside out and back to front. Then weigh up the risk, debate, assess, debate some more – and then figure out what you're prepared to lose in the worst possible scenario. Your house? Your partner?

Don't forget to take into account *force majeure*. What's that? It's when Princess Diana dies on opening night and your audience stays home glued to the television set. It's when there's an unseasonable

fall of snow and your audience can't get to the theatre. You'll be relieved to know there is non-performance insurance designed for these issues, but it's extremely expensive.

So you've weighed it all up and decided this is it. The product is right, the cast is willing, and the audience is potentially there. Great stuff. But the decision-making has only just begun.

Time

Remember to allow enough time to plan your tour: it's not going to happen next week. What's a sufficient lead time? It depends on the project. The shortest lead time you're ever likely to get away with is six months. However, it's safer to allow 12 to 18 months.

Information gathering

You're now at the stage where you need to invest some time and money. Firstly, you need to gather all the information required to construct a budget and put together a tour itinerary. Start with what you know: the production. You may even be able to begin with an existing budget but if not, these are the kinds of questions you need to answer:

- How many performers/crew are there and what will they expect to be paid?
- How many weeks of rehearsal will you require?
- Where will you rehearse and how much will it cost in rental?
- Will the company share bedrooms and how much is accommodation?
- What per diem will you pay?
- What does the set consist of? Will it need to have travelling cases built for it? How large is it in cubic metres? What does it weigh? What does that mean in terms of truck sizes?
- Will you need to tour the whole lighting/sound rig? What does it weigh? How many cubic metres is it?
- What rights (performance rights, music rights, etc) are involved in the work? Are they available? What do they cost?
- How long will it take to travel between venues?
- How long does it take to pack in to each venue?

- Will the company travel by road or air? If by road, will you have to supply a driver?
- How much are rental vehicles?

Don't expect to be able to construct an itinerary in an afternoon. You also need to have worked out when your cast members are available.

Before you can contact the venues, you need to consider wider issues such as how the current community trends in this area will affect your tour. Economically – the entertainment industry falls into the spending area known as the discretionary dollar. How are cafes faring? Like going to the theatre, eating out is an optional extra. Along with cancelling their theatre subscription, it's something people stop doing when they're worried about money. Politically – aside from any other political considerations, New Zealanders are traditionally conservative spenders in an election year. Planning your tour to coincide with the peak of an election campaign is not a good idea. What do New Zealanders do on election night? They watch television. Culturally – it's just a matter of being aware of what's happening outside your own patch. Which brings us to the competition.

The competition

Competition is not necessarily what's happening at the same time as your show. It could be the Film Festival that finished three weeks ago but drained people's wallets. Or it could be the Royal New Zealand Ballet coming through town two weeks after your independent dance work. In Wellington, for example, it's generally accepted that it's the kiss of death to try to put anything on in the month immediately following the New Zealand Festival. Its impact is not limited to that period. Festival tickets go on sale in October of the previous year. Competition can be divided into three categories: similar arts companies, other arts-related activities and other non-arts activities.

Similar arts companies

Similar arts companies may be on the road the same time as you, using the same venues. If this happens, you run the risk of losing a

portion of your audience who can afford to attend only one event a month. You may also discover that your opening night conflicts with the local repertory theatre's opening night. This means you will lose not only the audience who most want to see your theatrical work (they'll be performing) but also a lot of theatre fans (they'll be watching the local repertory).

How do you avoid this? To find out about tours by other arts companies, check every large company's planned performance dates and event websites such as www.NZLive.com. Call Playmarket, DANZ and SOUNZ (refer Service organisations, page 223). Read the newspaper and every flier you can get your hands on.

Local arts companies

Evaluating the local arts competition is harder. Start with the venue – venues can be very useful sources of information – they know what's happening around town generally, and what's planned to happen or has just happened. Also check with the local community arts council, read national arts publications and the local newspaper, and call the local tourist/information bureau, then cross your fingers.

Other arts-related activities

This covers all art forms except your own. The methods for checking potential conflicts are the same as those listed above. There's no way to avoid this. You simply have to take the time to do it.

Other non-arts activities

This covers a broad but important range of activities, including school holidays, Easter, Christmas, Anzac Day and all other forms of public holidays; elections; strikes; and sports events. Some dates, such as strikes, cannot be predicted, but timing your show to avoid school holidays is easy.

Clashing dates Don't forget to check for possible clashes with sports events. The planned date and time for *Jerusalem* in Dunedin coincided with the Otago Highlanders/Canterbury Crusaders rugby match. I'd done my homework 10 months earlier

when I was planning the tour. I'd rung the rugby union for a list of their at-home, evening games. They don't plan that far in advance. But the man thought we'd 'be bloody unlucky to clash'. We were. It did. If you're wondering why this might be a problem, check out who goes to rugby matches these days. The rugby union's stated prime demographic is women aged 25-55. Who makes entertainment decisions? You guessed it – women. What did we do? We changed the date and there was an immediate jump in ticket sales.

Drafting your itinerary

Armed with a list of potential clashes and the optimum touring period, you are now ready for the next step: the draft itinerary. At this point you will need to sit down with all the information you've acquired to date, along with a calendar and a detailed map of the areas to which you intend to tour.

A note at this stage – record the name, contact details and agreements you make with every person you talk to. Get into the habit of picking up a pen every time you make a phone call. E-mail has made life easier in this instance – don't delete anything until the tour is over and file everything. At the end of the tour is the time to decide what to keep and what to turf.

How do you find out about potential venues? The Entertainment Venues Association in New Zealand (EVANZ) has a list of venues, but you need to join EVANZ to get this list (refer Service organisations, page 223). A good starting point is to visit the venueweb website (www.venueweb.co.nz). Also check with the local authority, as many venues are owned by the Council. Another reliable method is to ask within the industry. Talk to people, including producers, who have been out on the road.

Using your research, put together a provisional list of the venues that you think are suitable for your show. Note *suitable*: there's no point putting a small, intimate show in a large, overwhelming venue. Technical viability also needs to be checked with your production/technical manager. Now phone or e-mail each venue. Pick

up a pen and paper first – always take notes. Using the phone is best because if other questions arise they can be answered immediately. Be persistent. Don't expect to get through on the first call. A lot of the smaller venues are run on a part-time basis.

Venue managers will give you available dates. Also ask about dates that are unavailable around the time you're interested in. That way you can plan around them. Dates can be firm, pencil-booked or second-pencilled. When you book dates, it's best to pencil them in: they become a firm booking when you pay a deposit and sign the contract.

There are two different kinds of pencilling: 'first pencil' and 'second pencil'. First pencil means that you have first call on those dates; second pencil means you have second call. If you're sure you want dates that you've second-pencilled, you can offer to put down a deposit. Etiquette then requires venue managers to go to the first pencil and say they have a potential depositor. The first pencil then has the opportunity to make a firm booking or release the dates.

Often large organisations, for example the Royal New Zealand Ballet, opera companies, festivals, the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and established events, such as the Smokefree Rockquest, pencil dates three to five years in advance. Closer to the time, they release dates they no longer require. If you second pencil these – even if you offer to put a deposit down – you still may not get these dates. That's because venues are prepared to hold the dates for these large organisations because they are valuable, ongoing customers and likely to actually use those dates.

Once you've contacted everyone on your list you'll be left with a lot of conflicting dates and large holes. About now, you'll start thinking dark thoughts about New Zealand's geography – it's long and thin with an unavoidable strip of water in the middle.

If your itinerary has you leaping from Auckland to Dunedin to New Plymouth to Christchurch, you'll need to sit down and revisit it. It may take some time to put together a more rational schedule. Don't forget to allow for travel times and pack-in/out. Provide days off – at least one day a week – if you want your tour to survive. Travel days are not days off even if the travel involved is only a 45-minute flight. Take your crew into consideration; they're always the first to lose their days off.

Be prepared to lose some venues. It's unlikely that you're going to get exactly what you want unless you're that large organisation booking three to five years in advance. It will probably take at least another round of phone calls before you end up with something like a reasonable tour. And even then it's still likely to change.