

# Arts in Rural England

The exercise currently being undertaken by Arts Council England (ACE) to explore opportunities for the arts in rural England offers a chance to make the case for the scale, quality and range of work that emanates from villages and small towns across the country. Gavin Stride explains why this is so important.

In many people's minds, art in the countryside is about making services available to communities who cannot easily access them. And ACE rightly places a priority on making the best work available to a wider audience through touring. However the arts in rural communities are about far more. It may come as a surprise to hear that most work being made in rural England is newly commissioned, experiments with new form and is presented in different ways and times, through new partnerships. It doesn't call itself 'radical' or 'experimental' because, like everywhere else, misconceptions about these terms abound in the minds of much of its audience. Nevertheless many artists working across rural England are grappling with how to make work that is rooted and contemporary, particular and universal, popular and progressive. A kind of critical vernacular if you will.

The make-up of rural communities has changed radically. Many villages may suffer from poor infrastructure but they are often better connected, international and culturally astute than any city of culture. There is a growing confidence in many rurally-based artists and companies to experiment with form and content and to connect with artists around the world working in similar contexts to broaden understanding and sharpen our sense of self. What's more, many of these artists instinctively form surprising partnerships with amateur and professional organisations to create and distribute their work. Look at Kneehigh, who are driving the debate around regional identity in Cornwall, or Rural Arts Media in Herefordshire who are training artists to reinvigorate the Youth Service, and Cartoon de Salve creating site-specific work for allotments.

Take village hall touring, in which the promoting, box office, front of house and marketing is undertaken by amateurs in the community – in a highly effective partnership in which the quality of experience relies equally on maker and audience. These partnerships – village hall, local champion and artists – are an extraordinary national resource. In the Northeast, for example, about 6,000 clubs and voluntary associations organise cultural activities each year.

But there is a chance to build on this model, to develop a new participative culture from which other opportunities flow. The first act of attending a performance or workshop can lead to an evolving relationship with communities. For me it is about rescuing the ability of ordinary individuals to use their own creativity. One study shows that over 70% of the drama audience is to amateur productions; and in Northamptonshire, a village-based amateur drama group has been using mixed media, film and newly composed music for a decade. Opportunities abound.

Much of the work in rural communities – across all art forms – is, out of necessity, broadcast rather than narrow cast. In a village the 'arts' audience is too small in itself, so companies develop work that are events that will attract the whole community. With television and the media increasingly looking to sub divide the market in a continuous attempt to target audiences it is a strength of art in rural communities that, at its best and out of necessity, the work engages everyone. This does not mean an abandonment of quality – poor initiatives always fail. Instead it demonstrates that popularism and artistic integrity are critical components of good art.

So what can we hope from the current exercise? It may be too much to expect that arts practice in rural England is recognised yet as a radical force – the Countryside Alliance has put paid to that – but seeing the value of making work with, as well as for, all parts of the country, that renewal and experiment is not the sole preserve of the cities and an espousing of the easy characterisation of the Countryside as a backward, romanticised place that, to be honest, never really existed.