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Case Study:

National Theatre of Scotland and its Sense of Place

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Abstract

This case study focuses on the newly formed National Theatre of Scotland (NTS). It provides a brief introduction into its history and mission before exploring its innovative, non-building based model and the positive and negative implications that this model has on its marketing mix.

The case study is centred on the concept of place. It demonstrates how NTS deals with the challenge of creating and delivering a consistent brand image and message when it is constantly a guest in other people's venues. It also focuses on the myriad opportunities that the touring model offers the company, illustrating with concrete examples how NTS is forced to constantly re-assess its sense of place and identity and how its marketing can be utilised to evoke the special relationship that it has developed with the diverse places it performs in.

By comparing and contrasting the theory with the practice, this study critically highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the existing arts marketing literature. It supports existing findings on barriers to attendance and the benefits of rural touring, but challenges the narrow definition of "place marketing", exposing its failure to reflect the complexities of the touring theatre model.

Keywords

National Theatre Scotland, place marketing, arts marketing, theatre, touring.

Biography

Ben is a Senior Lecturer in Arts & Entertainment Management at Leeds Metropolitan University with a professional background in theatre producing.

In 1997, he produced and directed Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, before moving to Paris, where he taught at the Sorbonne. He managed One World Actors Productions in Paris for two years and then moved back to the UK to manage the leading Scottish touring company Benchtours, before taking up a managerial post at the new National Theatre of Scotland.

Ben is a modern languages graduate from Nottingham University and holds an MBA from the University of Surrey's School of Management. In 2000, he completed a PhD in French Theatre and Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, comparing the plays of Jean-Paul Sartre and Eugène Ionesco. He is currently editing a new book on contemporary issues in the Arts and Entertainment Industry and his current research interests are related to the qualitative value and impact of theatre.

Case Study: National Theatre of Scotland and its Sense of Place

Introduction

The National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) grew out of decades of discussion and debate. Despite the country's long and proud theatrical heritage, it is Scotland's first ever national theatre and it is certainly no coincidence that it followed close on the heels of Scottish devolution in 1999.

NTS launched to the public in February 2006, so it is still very much a baby on the theatrical scene. Its model is unarguably original and experimental, and because it has little precedent, it is inevitably a work in progress, rife with novel challenges and almost impossible to benchmark.

This case study will hone in on one of the company's biggest challenges: the role and significance of "place" and how a national touring company should interpret it. To understand what the concept of place means to NTS and its audiences, we will need to delve into the mission of the company, before analysing the model and the impact that this has on the marketing function.

The Mission

As Edward Gordon Craig put it, theatre is not made from stones and bricks but through human bodies and voices (National Theatre of Scotland, 2005). This is a central tenet of the National Theatre of Scotland and it is what makes the company unique. For NTS was the first national theatre in the world set up to function without a theatre of its own. Instead, it aims to be truly national by working in close partnership with the existing theatre community to bring the best of Scottish theatre to audiences not just all over Scotland but all over the world.

The company's founding business plan contained the following statement of intent: "Scottish theatre has always been vibrant, demotic and pioneering. With the arrival of the NTS, we now have an opportunity to transform the meaning of national theatre on a global scale by creating a truly innovative structure, free of bricks and mortar institutionalism, which will be alert, flexible and radical. We can lead the world by creating a groundbreaking organisation producing outstanding theatre." (National Theatre of Scotland, 2005).

An international national theatre

The National Theatre of Scotland's international strategy includes the following main objectives:

- To ensure the company's work is seen in an international context by high profile touring and international festival appearances on an annual basis;
- To identify and develop relationships with key international artists and companies, whom we will invite to create work all over Scotland, influencing and working with existing artists and companies.

(National Theatre of Scotland, 2005).

NTS believes that a national theatre can only ever be an international theatre and that the two are symbiotically inter-dependent. So in its first three years of existence, it has championed internationalism and cultural exchange through a number of strategic initiatives including:

- sending a creative team from Glasgow to Sri Lanka to explore the country's rich tradition of puppetry and share their new-found skills with fellow practitioners;
- adapting the work of a Czech filmmaker to create a new piece of theatre for the Scottish stage;
- adapting an apocryphal modern classic by a Belgian company for a contemporary Scottish audience;
- bringing a group of Lebanese actors to Glasgow to develop and stage the story of a Palestinian village destroyed by an act of war.

The company has already exceeded its international ambitions with three successive appearances at both the Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe; Black Watch headlining almost every major international theatre festival in the world; three productions touring to New York; and three international co-productions showcasing in Scotland.

At the same time, it has produced work that is quintessentially Scottish and which goes to heart of and challenges Scotland's history and national identity. Mary Stuart brought fresh life to Schiller's classic play, which imagines a meeting between Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots. Tutti Frutti reincarnated John Byrne's legendary Scottish 1980s TV hit. Venus as a Boy staged Luke Sutherland's fantastical tale of an Orcadian transvestite who winds his way to Soho. And Black Watch told the story of a group of ex-soldiers from Fife who fought and lost in the Iraq War.



Figure 1: Emun Elliott as Fraz in Black Watch.
Image by Manuel Harlan, courtesy of National Theatre of Scotland.

The Model

Much of the company's prodigious success is due to its innovative and strategic business model. Unconstrained by the constant pressure and restriction of programming for specific venues, NTS can focus its human and physical resources on creating world-class theatre, reacting quickly to local and world events which, in turn, produce the 'urgent stories' it strives to tell. By co-producing with other theatres and theatre companies, it also succeeds in tapping into and supporting the best talent in Scotland, while providing a properly funded infrastructure to maximise the country's artistic potential abroad.

A sense of place: redefining Scotland's stages

Precisely because it is unencumbered by a space of its own, the organisation is forced into finding creative and appropriate spaces for every new production it produces. So to date the company has performed in tower blocks, forests, ferries, museums, drill halls, football stadia, shop windows, tenement flats and village halls as well as in the great theatres of Scotland like Glasgow's Citizens', Dundee Rep, the Royal Lyceum, Eden Court, the Traverse Theatre and His Majesty's Theatre in Aberdeen.



Figure 2: Home Caithness, performed in Caithness Glass Factory.
Image by Dominic Ibbotson, courtesy of National Theatre of Scotland.

This strategic approach ensures that the existing physical infrastructure of Scottish theatre is used to the full without the wastefulness of designing, constructing and maintaining yet another expensive public building. It also means that the company is highly mobile and light on its feet, able to tour the length and breadth of the country (and indeed the world) and to constantly reach new and diverse audiences, many of whom, research suggests, are put off theatre by the strangeness and imposing aspect of theatre buildings themselves (Harland & Kinder, 1999; Kotler & Scheff, 1997). So the company's unique and flexible model frees it up strategically to achieve its mission to the full.

The Marketing

Marketing the work of a national theatre without a theatre presents a raft of novel opportunities and challenges. To understand how NTS strives to turn the challenges into opportunities, it suffices to start at the beginning and to look back to its opening production, *Home*. Faced with the unenviable proposition of launching a new national theatre under intense national and international scrutiny in a theatrical climate of soaring expectations, NTS's Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone decided to produce ten simultaneous productions in locations all over Scotland, from Dumfries in the south to Shetland in the north. In a bold statement of intent, the company called this ensemble of productions *Home* – a deeply evocative and nostalgic concept, which, while inviting audiences to consider what “home” meant to them, clearly intimated that the home of Scotland's new national theatre would be in the diverse landscapes and buildings of Scotland itself.

According to Featherstone (2006) NTS exists “to exceed expectations of what and where theatre can be”. Again, there is an acknowledgement here that place must be at the heart of the company's mission and activity. This determination to constantly push boundaries and break down walls was spectacularly apparent in *Home: Glasgow*, which was set in a local tower block with performers abseiling down it.



Figure 3: *Home Glasgow*, performed in and around a tower block in Cranhill in Glasgow's East End. Image by Peter Dibdin, courtesy of National Theatre of Scotland.

In marketing terminology, NTS has revolutionised its distribution channels. Although touring theatre has been around for centuries, this is the first time that a national theatre has rejected the idea of an institutional home which mimetically reflects its nation's cultural heritage and identity. Because NTS is a touring theatre company on a grand scale with a national budget, it can also for the first time embody the many

diverse guises of non-building-based theatre: street theatre, promenade theatre, rural touring, site-specific theatre, performance art and installations. All these genres offer a different perspective on the notion of place; embraced together under one flagship umbrella organisation, they combine indeed to shake perceptions of what and where theatre can be.

Given Scotland's geography, rural touring merits particular attention here. In its short life to date, NTS has toured over fifteen small-scale shows in addition to the ten Home events described above. Most of these productions have played in village halls and community centres all over Scotland. There are several reasons why rural touring is so important to NTS: Firstly, as the national theatre company in Scotland, it accepts it has an explicit duty to produce and tour work all over the country; secondly, it acknowledges that people living in rural communities are just as entitled to high quality theatre as their compatriots in Edinburgh or Glasgow; and thirdly, it values the artistic, social and audience development opportunities unique to rural touring.

As Matarasso (2004, pp.10-11) puts it: "Rural touring is not a poor substitute for the kind of experience offered by urban arts venues. It is qualitatively different in several respects. The facilities may not be as good, but the intimacy of the space, the opportunity to meet the performers, the fact that most of the audience know each other – *these and other factors give a village hall show a unique power. [...] Both artists and audiences consistently feel that such shows are exciting, memorable and have a quality which is distinctly valuable.*"

Arts marketing literature often refers to beautiful, transformational and transcendent experiences, which take people out of the everyday and create or reinforce a sense of community (Brown & Novak, 2007; McCarthy et al, 2004; Matarasso, 1996). But what is interesting here is the especial significance of the place, which holds some sort of "unique power". It is refreshing to see the positive qualities of rural venues emphasised here; far too often, producers focus on the 'problems' of rural touring. But the power and magic of the place is not a new idea in theatre studies, whose literature is replete with transformation and catharsis.

So the non-building-based model provides NTS with a range of invaluable opportunities including internationalism, flexibility, responsiveness, financial efficiency, audience development and even omnipresence in addition to all the particular benefits of the different touring-based theatrical genres themselves. But what about the challenges?

There are many challenges inherent to running a large-scale touring company, but one of the most significant is branding. How can a company establish and deliver a consistent brand message when its product is constantly distributed through someone else's channel and delivered in someone else's venue? In effect, willingly or otherwise, touring companies relinquish control of much of the marketing mix, affected as they are by the augmented products, services, branding, promotion, pricing, sales and distribution all under the control of their venues. In many cases, all the touring company is left to control is the core artistic product itself.

In the worst case scenario, the touring company becomes little more than a supplier and may have no more influence than a dairy farm does over a supermarket. But the analogy is simplistic and fortunately there are alternative scenarios. Although it is fair to say that NTS has struggled to assert its identity in some of the more established

venues, its model is essentially collaborative, and co-productions and strategic partnerships, together with a strong digital presence, have enabled it to create arguably one of the strongest theatre brands in the UK in less than three years. It has also developed a strong sense of identity and place and discovered a sense of collaborative ownership of the existing theatre infrastructure of Scotland.

A national marketing tool

One of the controversies surrounding its funding model is that NTS (along with Scotland's four other national companies) is funded directly by the Scottish Government, a situation which breaks the traditional "arm's length principle" – the de facto model of arts funding employed throughout the UK. As discussed, this fact bequeaths NTS with the significant responsibility of reflecting the Scottish psyche and aesthetic and representing it on the international stage. It also inevitably assigns it a role as a national marketing tool, tasked, whether willingly or not, with shaping and strengthening the Scottish brand externally while attracting inward visitors through cultural tourism. The Scottish Government has not been slow to acknowledge this (providing further grist to the mill of detractors of the funding model) and has openly ridden on the back of international hits such as *Black Watch*.

The *Black Watch* phenomenon is fascinating because its relationship with the Scottish Government is particularly complex. On one level, the Government has taken a natural cultural pride in its flagship new national company, which was unprecedentedly invited to open its parliamentary session with a gala performance of *Black Watch*. But on another, it has provided extra funding to enable the play to tour internationally because it communicated a distinctly Scottish message and sat happily with the anti-Iraq war sentiments of the SNP. This ambiguous bond illuminates the often unacknowledged role of culture and the arts in national and international branding and must fundamentally question their relationship with any government that funds them.

Conclusion

We have seen the central role and significance that the National Theatre of Scotland accords to the concept of place. As a touring company free from the burden of "bricks and mortar institutionalism", NTS is able to forge a special relationship with the places it performs in and, through the magic of these places, connect with its audiences on their home ground.

As a national touring company with no theatre of its own, NTS faces many challenges and opportunities. Its main strategic challenge is to maintain control and ownership of its marketing mix as a guest in other people's venues. The company is striving to achieve this by working in a spirit of collaboration and partnership. Its main opportunity is to maximise the benefits of its itinerant model and it seizes this opportunity by questioning and capitalising on its unique relationship with place.

As a discipline, place marketing can be defined as "activities undertaken to create, maintain or change attitudes or behaviours towards particular places" (Kotler et al 2001, p.465). Place marketing is usually applied in the context of tourism, where it generally describes the marketing effort involved in a city or country's self-promotion. But we have seen in this context of touring that place marketing can play a much more complex role. For a touring performing arts company, place marketing is

about much more than simply where its tickets are sold: it challenges marketers to develop a strong, yet transferable brand and to evoke the intangible sense of magic of every place they tour to.

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