

The impact of Brexit on Motionhouse

The failure to include an EU-wide cultural work permit and visa free travel for touring professionals and artists in the deal between the UK and the EU will have a catastrophic effect across all touring art forms - theatre, dance, circus, visual arts and music. How this issue is resolved will have a fundamental effect on our viability as an international touring company, and our ability to continue creating world-class work to take around the UK and the world.

EU touring is under threat

At the time of writing at the end January 2021, very early in the booking process (with multiple leads still to follow), we are already in discussion about 56 performances at 20 venues in 11 EU countries to the end of 2022.

As one of the UK's busiest touring companies of our scale, taking our dance-circus productions to theatres and festivals across Europe accounts for **approximately 50% of our touring income**. Over the past 15 years we have built up a strong network of European partners.

In 2018/19 and 2019/20 (2020/21 was hit by Covid), we toured 7 shows to 33 theatres and festivals, performing 125 times in 13 countries (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Spain, The Netherlands and Romania) generating just over £280,000 in income. In 2017 and 2018 we were also commissioned to create and deliver large-scale outdoor events in Denmark and Romania, which generated a further £140,000.

Under current conditions, it is impossible to imagine how we will be able to do this now. The paperwork and cost involved will reduce our ability to be responsive to demand. We risk losing our connections with European promoters and festivals, who may in turn look to EU artists to avoid the complexities of working with the UK.

In the short term, one of the biggest challenges we are facing for bookings in the next few months is finding the information we need to do business. Each EU country has different rules for third country nationals working, and we are currently spending huge amounts of time trying to find out the information we need about requirements for work permits. Unfortunately, we are finding conflicting information and advice and even country embassies themselves are unable to give us clear information. Therefore, we are unable to proceed with confidence with any of our European partners. We are in discussion about bookings in the EU in summer 2021 (Covid-permitting), therefore finding this information in order to start the paperwork process is urgent.

We are currently already facing the impact of rebuilding after Covid, but despite the devastation of the pandemic, under the current conditions, Brexit will have a deeper and more lasting impact. Without the ability to tour in the EU with ease, at best we will have to drastically reduce our European touring, severely affecting our income; at worst the future of the company and its dynamic vision, extensive touring and contribution to UK culture will be at threat.

Background

Motionhouse is a touring dance-circus company founded in 1988 by Louise Richards and Kevin Finnan MBE (Choreographer and Movement Director for the Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Paralympic Games). **On average 50% of our annual touring income comes from taking our work to the EU.** From our base in Leamington Spa, we create and tour extraordinary dance-circus productions to theatres and festivals in the UK and internationally, in a typical year reaching audiences upwards of 100,000 people. Our powerful mix of dance and circus is inspiring and exhilarating, and our touring model means that we reach people in their own communities. Alongside our touring, our inspirational teaching and youth and other participation work reaches about 10,000 people every year. We are recognised in the UK and Europe for our high-quality work and longstanding contribution to dance. Our successful business model and strategic planning has meant an increase in turnover from ~£750k in 2017/18 to ~£1.3m in both 2018/19 and 2019/20. In the financial year 2019/20 Arts Council England funding accounted for only 35% of turnover – the vast majority is earned through our touring.

The problem

Under the UK/EU trade deal as it stands, our ability to respond to demand is severely compromised, threatening our current business model and potentially stopping us taking our work to the EU.

Prior to Brexit, taking a booking for our work in Europe was no more complicated than taking a booking in the UK. We were able to travel, transport our sets, work and perform in any of the member states with no restrictions. Now this only applies to The Republic of Ireland. We will be limited on the overall amount of time each performer or crew member can travel both within the EU as a whole and within each individual country, and we will have to navigate the different requirements of every member state, which all apply different approaches for non-EU workers generating earned income within their countries, setting their own rules regarding waivers, visas and work permits and maximum working days allowed. Large amounts of time for each potential booking will be required and touring to the EU will become a major administrative and logistical burden, adding significant costs to our operations, with the danger that the additional costs will price UK artists out of the market. We will need to work out the requirements of each country, factoring in the time to apply for visas, work permits or waivers, creating onerous additional paperwork and massive pressure on capacity. From our research, waivers vary from country to country. Beyond the permitted waiver period, work permits, or temporary residence permits must be obtained, and social security payments may need to be paid in the host country.

This removes our ability to be agile and responsive to our venue, festival and promoter partners in the EU. It will mean that last minute bookings will be practically impossible to respond to due to the lead in time for entry documentation. And if we exceed permitted working days, we will have to turn down work. The restrictions will create further pressure on us as a touring company as performers cannot be replaced last minute should a performer fall ill or sustain an injury.

In addition to in-country limitations, we must also monitor how much time every company member spends in the Schengen area – including holidays. This is because UK nationals now only have the right to travel to the Schengen area for a maximum of 90 days out of every 180, which could put us in the position of having to refuse work. In 2019 we were eleven days (one additional booking) off our crew reaching that limit - they usually travel in advance of the performers and return after them.

On top of this we will need to produce 'carnets'; paperwork that allows us to move our equipment (sets, lights, costumes) out and back into the UK. Again, the cost of a carnet (approximately £700 per production per year, plus staff time to prepare them) reduces our bottom line and pushes up our prices. We will also need to factor in additional days for queuing at ports to leave and return to the UK as the paperwork is checked. At the moment we are factoring in an additional 2 days, with the additional associated costs.

For our larger productions which have big sets and require a 7.5T truck, (our smaller shows with smaller sets can travel in a 19 cubic metre van) 'Cabotage' rules make longer tours impossible with a vehicle registered in the UK. A truck registered in the UK can only move between 2 points in any one EU country in 7 days before returning home. So, a 2-week tour to 3 cities for example, could not work. There are two solutions: use EU hauliers, meaning UK companies lose out or UK hauliers will need to register trucks in the EU.

All of this comes at a cost – in staff time, in transport and accommodation costs, in people time to account for delays at borders, and for the expense of carnets, permits and visas. Using bookings currently in discussion in 11 countries, on current assumptions based on the available information, we may be facing additional costs running to £36,750 in visas, work-permits and carnets alone. In many countries we will also have to pay additional taxes, potentially running to 19% to 20% of our fee.

As a working example, for a festival in Germany in summer 2021, the additional costs of a carnet, visas and additional taxes (foreign entertainers tax and social security contributions) could amount to up to 30% of our fee, which we would then have to charge back to the festival or take from our bottom line.

The Solution

Short term

We urgently need clarity on the requirements of each European country for waivers, work permits and visas to enable us to pursue and process bookings and respond to demand.

Long term

An EU-wide cultural work permit and visa free travel for touring professionals and exemptions for the transport of performing arts equipment. This would enable UK artists to continue to export fantastic work made in the UK and valued by our friends in the EU in a cost-effective way.

The cultural sector contributed £32.3bn to the UK economy in 2018ⁱ – more than twice what sport brings in. Allowing cultural exports to take place unhampered must be part of the UK's 'Open for Business' strategy so that we can continue to be respected contributors in the creative and cultural sectors across the world. UK artists across all art forms have an excellent reputation and we urge the government to do everything it can to support the continued export of this work. As a mature company of 33 years, we are proud to export work made in the UK and to represent our country. We really hope that younger, upcoming companies will have the same opportunity.

ⁱ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/863632/DCMS_Sectors_Economic_Estimates_GVA_2018.pdf