

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q. What is the history of Big Wheel?

A. We started in 1984 as a group of students from Oxford University doing fringe theatre. That didn't make any money, so we started doing slightly less 'serious' schools workshops. Then we realised that kids hate 'serious' stuff so we started to develop the totally excellent shows we present today.

The '80s was a bad time to be doing schools work in the UK (there were loads of strikes and the National Curriculum was being introduced to howls of agony) so we started working abroad.

Our work on the continent took off and became our main work until 1997 when Britain opted out of the Euro and all the European currencies devalued against the pound, making our schools workshops far more expensive. Coupled with big changes in school funding across Europe, this meant that European tours were no longer a big cash cow for theatre companies. So we turned to working in the UK.

Since 2002 we have worked increasingly for the National Health Service and related organisations, providing staff training and tailor-made presentations at conferences.

Since 2004 we have developed a wide variety of workshops for UK schools, in particular shows on Climate Change, Healthy Eating and Diversity.

Q. How are you financed?

A. We are a partnership, which means that technically we are commercial enterprise which tries to make a profit. We are VAT registered, which means we have to charge VAT on everything we do in the UK (but not on our foreign earnings), but also means we can claim back VAT on most of our vatable expenses.

We have to earn enough money from fees we are paid to finance the costs of each project, the day-to-day running costs of running the business (office costs, publicity etc) and have enough left over at the end to pay our own salaries.

We receive no funding of any kind. However, many of the projects we do are for

funded bodies. But they pay fees in exactly the same way as a commercial client would.

- For instance, a few years ago we were contracted to present a series of workshops on creative writing and criticism, plus two teacher-training days, over a period of four weeks, for a group of schools in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. We quoted a fee for the whole project, which was then paid partly by the schools out of their English budget, partly by the County Councils and partly by the Arts Council.

Mainly, our work is paid for as a straightforward fee. How do we work out what to charge?

- For our main schools workshops programme, we work out a fee that covers our expenses, so that is all the school has to pay - there are no hidden costs (apart from in some countries like Sweden, Switzerland and Italy, where a tax is payable in addition). When a school is very far away, or in countries where distances are very big such as in Sweden, we ask the school to provide accommodation. One big problem over the past few years is that we have always set our prices in local currency, but it has been impossible to know how much the currency will be worth when we actually come to get paid.
- How schools actually fund our visits varies widely from country to country. In Holland, for instance, the school normally pays for our visit out of a 'culture budget'; in Belgium, the students all pay individually.
- For corporate clients, or for schools requesting a tailor-made programme, we quote a fee based on the number of days the project will require, plus travel and accommodation expenses and any other extra costs relating to the specific project. The number of days does not mean the time actually presenting the project, but all the days involved in setting it up (meeting the client, researching the topic, corresponding with the client, devising the work, rehearsing it, and any follow-up work - many clients require a report). Extra costs might be having to purchase or hire costumes or props, or employing an expert to advise us on a particular project.

Whether working out a fixed per-workshop fee for a schools tour, or a one off fee for a corporate event, the basic questions are the same:

1. what is the client prepared to pay?

2. how much do we need to charge to make a profit?

The first question is easier to answer than the second. By asking around, we can find out what the 'going rate' is for a visit to a school, or a corporate training day. But whether that will make us any money is another question. Often, a project which looks very attractive at first, turns out less so once all the costs have been taken into account. Recently we did a project which paid £1,500 for a show which lasted half an hour. Seems great, until you work out the number of hours that went into it: we worked out we were getting paid less than the minimum wage.

However, you have to take risks to succeed. We have often done projects which we knew would lose money if we thought that eventually they might lead to more work. Often this means borrowing a lot of money. If you are thinking about starting up a business like ours bear in mind the sobering thought that at one stage we had borrowed more than the value of a small house. But against this bear in mind that our annual turnover was soon a lot more than this, so once we were in profit, it was easy to pay back.

One big difference for us has been that most of our earnings have been in 'Euroland', that is, countries that either use the Euro, or have currencies which closely shadow the Euro, like Sweden or Switzerland. This means that our earnings have been very dependent on currency fluctuations. These often make much more of a difference to our yearly profit or loss than how much work we actually do. Around the time that the Euro fell dramatically against the Pound, we had the strange experience of having a record year in terms of numbers of performances - more than 800 - but made a lot less money than a couple of years previously when we had presented only half that number! For us Britain's decision to stay out of the Euro has made the export part of our business much less profitable, meaning that we now do much less work on the continent than we used to

Q. How is the company run?

A. Two of us, Jeni Williams and Roland Allen, are the partners in the company. We employ around 3 people full-time all year. Most of the year we additionally employ a further 4 to 6 actors.

A Partnership means that the company is not actually a 'company' in the sense of a Limited Company.

Everyone else is taken on for specific projects. Normally, actors and directors are self-employed, so we agree a fee for their participation in a particular project.

Occasionally, we employ people long-term, in which case they have contracts based on Equity (the actors union). We base our fees and wages on Equity recommendations, though of course some people are paid much more, if their experience is particularly important for a project. We always pay fees to anyone helping us, (although when devising new work, always an expensive and risky time, we occasionally work on a basis of 'Skills exchange' - so we offer our services in return for another's).

When our teams work abroad, we try to arrange things so that they have as easy a time as possible. We provide accommodation in comfortable holiday homes, and make sure they have precise instructions about how to get to all their destinations. We use nice new vehicles that don't break down and are comfortable to drive often very long distances (Ford Mondeos, if you need to know - they should sponsor us for that plug!)

Q. What about publicity?

A. Nearly all our publicity for our theatre and drama-based training work has been either mail-shots or word-of-mouth. Another thing we do is present a free show if we think it may lead to more work. We have occasionally advertised in the media (teaching journals etc) but found this did not get much response. We do however advertise our venue hire in newspapers and magazines.

One thing we often get asked is to submit a video of our work. We have never done this, because we find a video never gives a true account of what our workshops are like. They are so dynamic and interactive that to give an impression of them one would need loads of cameras like a TV studio. And then the participants would feel intimidated and shy, and the whole thing wouldn't work. So although we use still photos a lot, we rely on description, not video, to sell our product.

Mailshots have been the way we have sold our work to schools. The formula is simple enough. You obtain a list of schools, and send them all a letter saying how fabulous you are. Of course it's not as easy as that. Getting hold of a list of schools in for instance Italy means spending several days on the phone being told its *impossibile*, and eventually going to the ministry in Rome and sitting there refusing to move when they want to lock up and have lunch until they produce the list which you have been able to see for the last three hours on the bookshelves, clearly marked *Elenco ufficiale delle Scuole statali* (if you think that's good, the Danish list is called the *Ars Bok*). More and more, however, in the UK and northern Europe, lists exist on disc. In the UK there are loads of agencies which will, for a fee, get the lists for you and even do all your envelope-

stuffing and addressing. When you start up you do all that yourself, until you realise you are spending nearly every hour of your life envelope stuffing when you thought you were a glamorous artist, at which point you ring an agency, or hire a secretary. A few tips:

- **The promotional material** you send to potential clients *must* be something they will take time (1) to read, (2) show to a sceptical boss, and (3) present to an even more sceptical budget committee. It needs to be instantly clear that what you are doing is Really Going To Make A Big Difference. Select photos carefully not just to look good, but to explain what you do.
- **Language** is important. If the client can be expected to be completely at ease reading English, then use that. But in countries like Italy and Germany, even English teachers are not always particularly fluent, so in those cases make sure that at least the first thing they read is in their own language. Bear in mind that the person who opens the letter may be a secretary, so it needs to be something that is immediately comprehensible.
- **It must be easy to reply.** Sounds obvious, but you need to make this as easy as possible. People won't easily write a letter or even phone or e-mail. We send a reply card, so all they have to do is tick the box and send it off.
- **'No guts no glory.'** Mailshots do work, but they need courage, as you need to send a lot for, initially, little return. It's a risk each time. Our first mailout of German schools cost more than £17,000, which means that in the first year of work that tour lost money (taking into account all our other costs). But then everyone started to tell other schools, and we had newspaper cuttings (in German) about our visits to add to our mail-shots, and in a year's time the tour was in profit, including the return on the original mailout.

Free shows are a great way to sell yourself, particularly if (like us) you are selling something that is hard to describe (and impossible to video). But we've learnt through experience not to offer this unless there really is the possibility of a good return on the investment (actors' fees, extra rehearsal time, travel, accommodation etc). A show at a conference attended by 250 teachers from schools likely to employ us is certainly worth doing. A free show for one school on the off-chance that they might ask for more is not!

Word of Mouth is really important. It's been important for our schools work but even more so for other stuff. People hear about us from other people in their field and get in touch. That's the way all our corporate and institutional work has come about - we've never advertised in this field. Corporate clients are tough cookies. They are unimpressed by advertising however slick - they've seen it all before. But when a friend says, 'a theatre company did this amazing presentation which really transformed our seminar' that hits home.

- You can't *buy* 'word of mouth' but you can make it more likely. For instance, our actors always travel with a set of leaflets, so if a client is especially enthusiastic, or mentions a colleague who might be interested, you can immediately give them some material to pass on.
- We always suggest to clients that they invite colleagues from other schools or companies to our presentation. They often do, and this often leads to new contracts.

Q. How do you devise your workshops?

A. We ask a question, for instance...

1. **Why is Shakespeare any good?**
2. **What is HIV / AIDS?**
3. **How do you criticise a novel?**
4. **How can departments in an organisation communicate better?**

...and try to answer it, using drama as our method of communication.

Q. What are your influences?

A. Shakespeare, James Bond, and watching lots of telly

- especially the Muppet Show, the Big Breakfast, the Fast Show, Morecombe and Wise, any game show like Blind Date or The Generation Game, any chat show like Oprah or Jerry Springer. Just any telly really. It's all good to learn from even the rubbish stuff.

And we learnt a lot from a very funny Frenchman called Philippe Gaulier, who taught us more about how theatre works than anyone.

Q. Do you have a mission?

A. No.

Q. Do you have any advice for someone thinking of setting up a theatre company?

A. Give people what they want.