



Stoppgap Dance Company which is appearing at Decibel Performing Arts Showcase



Visual artist Hetain Patel



Decibel pumps up the volume

As the fifth Decibel Performing Arts Showcase takes place in September, Jo Caird speaks to organiser Nike Jonah and finds out what's in the programme

“You cannot have excellence in the arts without diversity,”

says Nike Jonah, project manager of the biennial Decibel Performing Arts Showcase, which is taking place next month in Manchester.

Now in its fifth incarnation, Decibel is attracting delegates from venues and festivals across the UK and internationally. The showcase promotes work that reflects the cultural and ethnic diversity of the UK, including that made by artists from black and other ethnic minority backgrounds, LGBT theatre-makers and anyone else with limited opportunities to participate in the arts. This year the remit of the Arts Council England-run event has also been widened to specifically welcome deaf and disabled artists.

The focus of the showcase may be the diverse practice detailed above, but Decibel's objective is an issue that affects all performing arts companies – touring. Jonah, who has been leading the

Cocker is a founding member of Eggs Collective, a female performance collective presenting an extract of a new show, *The Life and Death of Eggs Collective*, as a work in progress. For Cocker, who attended Decibel in 2009, shortly after forming the collective, seeing “more established companies putting on work that wasn't finished just made it feel a bit more achievable and realistic”.

Gareth Lloyd Roberts, producer and programmer at Wales Millennium Centre, has attended and booked work from the last two showcases and says the way Decibel is organised is conducive to positive conversations between delegates and artists. The shorter presentations allow artists to conserve energy for the business of networking once their performances are finished, he suggests. “Artists go all out to try and sell their product from a performance point of view, but this gives them the opportunity to perform, to take a stock a little bit and to come out and then have a chat.”

national and international tours in 2010, is returning this September with a follow-up, *Be Like Water*. “The networking was very useful,” says Patel. “Decibel opened up relationships for work following *Ten* as well. Although you are pitching one project, you're always looking for future investment in you as an artist rather than necessarily piece to piece”.

A new addition to Decibel, following a pilot in 2009, is *Market Place*, a trade fair for performing arts companies not featured in the main programme, as well as those organisations that, Jonah explains, “feed into the arts ecology of this country, or have diversity at the heart of what they do and need to shout about it”.

Bill Bragin, director of public programming for the Lincoln Center in New York attended the pilot fair and found it “a great opportunity to make connections with some of the artists and their representatives, and begin building relationships”.

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Cabaret performers Eggs Collective



Singer/songwriter Esca

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The focus of the showcase may be the diverse practice detailed above, but Decibel's objective is an issue that affects all performing arts companies – touring. Jonah, who has been leading the showcase since 2007, explains the rigorous selection process.

“It’s about the best work and it’s about the work that really has the potential to tour,” she says. “Infrastructure is a hugely important consideration. Are you at the top of your game? Is your website in order? International delegates don’t have the patience – they want you to be ready because you’re competing against the best from other countries around the world.”

The hugely varied programme that takes place over the four days of the festival is split into three strands – pitch, work in progress and tour ready – each of which involves artists presenting an extract of their work rather than a full-length piece. This flexible approach is something Jonah is particularly pleased with as she feels it gives the artists greater scope to build a showcase experience to suit their needs, whether that’s getting booked for an international tour, or getting creative input and constructive criticism from experienced delegates.

Artists and delegates taking part are also positive about this aspect of the showcase. Sara

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The business to business nature of the showcase is something Jonah is keen for artists to engage with – briefings held in the run-up to the event ensure artists are up to speed with what national, international and rural promoters will be looking for. During the showcase itself, artists are encouraged to make the most of opportunities to engage with the delegates, not just at the networking events, but also informally. The showcase is timetabled so as to enable delegates and performers to attend as many events as possible.

This relaxed atmosphere is to the advantage of everyone involved, explains Jonah: “Programmers say they don’t want to be in a showcase that’s just programmers because they can be quite cynical and they talk about work in a particular way. So what the artists do is they break it up a little bit and inject that creativity and energy – that’s what’s nice about having the artists involved.”

Visual artist and theatre-maker Hetain Patel presented his debut theatre show, *Ten*, as a work in progress at Decibel 2009, and following successful

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“We recognise that we don’t have all the answers,” says Jonah. “Sometimes the arts council is seen as an organisation that’s just working with the arts sector. What we’re saying is that because achieving great art is for everyone, we want to hear what everyone has to say.”

This desire to open up the performing arts to everyone is ultimately what motivates the team behind Decibel. But what’s remarkable about the festival is that it’s not just about providing a showcase for diverse artists and facilitating the touring that will get their work seen by new audiences, it’s also a means of inspiring those who take part.

Patel says: “With any sort of minority part of the arts, because there are less artists inhabiting that space, everyone needs to keep challenging each other so that you can’t get away with producing weak work. Something like Decibel ups everybody’s ante and challenges you to readjust your work and strive for it to be better.”

Decibel Performing Arts Showcase runs from September 13-16 at Manchester Town Hall and other venues. Visit www.decibel-pas.com