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Culture Mill and Australian Dance Company The Farm Prove That Global Collaboration Plays in Saxapahaw

By Brian Howe



Courtesy of the Culture Mill

The Farm and Culture Mill: Trust the Bus

or an organization that officially launched fifteen months ago, **Culture Mill** is a well-established force in the Triangle's artistic life, whether presenting

F dance shows at the Carrack in Durham or **Trust the Bus** in its Saxapahaw stomping grounds. The nonprofit especially stands out for bringing in international independent artists we'd otherwise see in academic settings or not at all—the ones who are working in their regions the way ours are here, crafting experiences with local terroirs on cobbled-together budgets.

Artists from different parts of the world face different economic challenges. Culture Mill, which has hosted performers from Germany and France, has adroitly worked global levers at the local level. Collaborating with foreign artists taps into public funding, more plentiful in many other countries than in ours, and harnesses it to our region's private funding culture.

"We start by finding a way to do it however we can, crowdfunding, calling in favors, and applying for little bits of money," explains Tommy Noonan. "That's not sustainable, but it demonstrates what is possible on an independent level in order to get more comprehensive institutional support." It's working: Culture Mill recently received a two-year grant that will sustainably expand its reach beyond personal connections.

Noonan, who is from Durham, directs Culture Mill with **Murielle Elizéon**, who is from France. Before moving to Saxapahaw, they lived in Berlin, where they first collaborated with **The Farm** (Elizéon is a member). This weekend, the Australian dance company performs in the **Trust the Bus** series, in which you travel by bus to an unknown destination for a genre-smashing performance.

The Farm is a loose collective, based in Gold Coast, Queensland, with members around the world. One afternoon, its directors gather at Carrboro's Looking Glass Café with Noonan and Elizéon. Gavin Webber and Grayson Millwood have been working together for more than a decade, but their group officially became The Farm more recently, when it started receiving funding from the Gold Coast city council.

Webber and Millwood are accomplished modern dancers from relatively conventional theater-bound backgrounds. But as The Farm, they've increasingly ventured into the interactive, site-specific realm—perfect for **Trust the Bus**, which is always temporary, organic, and unique.

"The nature of the series is not that you just plunk a work down at some cool place," Noonan explains. "The experience is completed by the audience. The Farm has a body of material and ideas, but we're going to interface with that, and the thing created will be a new thing."

The second season's May debut featured Durham's **Little Green Pig Theatrical Concern**, which recently began trying to eliminate the show-by-show scrounge by **funding its season through Patreon**, where users become sustainers for artists.

After a raucous ride during which a man yelled homiletic non sequiturs in a bad Russian accent, the bus stopped, and Noonan climbed in through the window, dressed as a dissipated yachtsman. A series of starkly lit tableaux waited in a dark field. A miner dug a pit. A musician sang a murder ballad. The ubiquitous Liam O'Neill played an accordion in a bathtub. Tormented, Elizéon danced on a low, candlelit stage.

Trust the Bus's magic derives from its mysteriousness, so little can be said about The Farm's plans. Suffice it to say that this is a company that once

built an office on a Gold Coast shoreline and stayed there "selling real estate" for two days, climbing onto the table when the tide rose. Another recent show had people popping out of the sand to startle spectators who were preoccupied by a distant figure in the shallows.

"We're doing a lot at the beach because everywhere is the beach," Millwood says, laughing. "Gold Coast has a very strong surfing culture; it doesn't have a big contemporary arts scene. It's important to us to stay connected to people in different places and use those influences."

The Farm's Trust the Bus experience draws material from an in-process show that was sparked by a story in which postmodern author Paul Auster discovers that someone has been cut out of an old family photo.

"There's something very clear in the show that has to do with what's real about memory," Webber says, "and how we rewrite our histories."

"It's the idea of cutting people out of history," Millwood adds. They're prone to finishing each other's thoughts, and sometimes, one will mistake the other's story for something that happened to him.

"If you keep on hearing a story, somehow it becomes reality," Millwood says. "Auster chases his father's ghost and history, which is part of [this piece]—what does it mean when two stories come into conflict?"

Noonan and Elizéon will also perform in the piece. The two groups developed similar ideas about artist-driven cultures despite their different circumstances. In Australia, more copious public funding also comes with more intervention from administrators.

"We don't have a philanthropy system as strong as you do, and people tend to be more reliant on government funding," Webber says. "A lot of money goes to company infrastructure and non-artistic personnel, and then they have to apply for grants to make work."

In the U.S., where government funding is scanty, a lively crowdfunding economy has risen into the gulf. The Farm will receive per diems, lodging, and production support from Culture Mill, but no salary, and Australian government funding covered its travel costs.

But such hustle is becoming less imperative for Culture Mill, thanks to a grant from the **Kenan Charitable Trust**. It will allow Noonan and Elizéon to become paid staffers, hire new positions, and establish a solid budget for existing and new programs.

"The grant will allow us to develop the three intertwined parts of our program: artist residencies, education, and performances," Elizéon says. Culture Mill is planning a new series, "Articulating Value," which will convene local artists to discuss their own economic, social, and political value. It's part of a fruitful broader effort to experiment with ways to sustain artists and weave them into a broader community.

"Working with wonderful people like The Farm has demonstrated that our model is meaningful to this community," Elizéon says. "The Kenan Trust is saying, grow what you've been doing, make it sustainable for yourselves, and keep going."

This article appeared in print with the headline "Round and Round"

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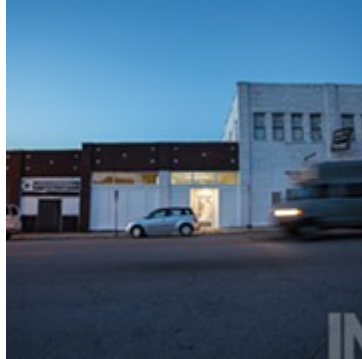
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