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'The pandemic will be a thing of the past': the producer taking a gamble on a 2021 theatre tour

Rob Fennah is leading the way with this year's first announced tour – and he believes it won't be socially distanced

By *Marianka Swain*

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'The pandemic will be a thing of the past': the producer taking a gamble on a 2021 theatre tour

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By Marianka Swain
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'We're bringing confidence back to theatre': Rob Fennah on *By The Waters Of Liverpool*

The uncertainties about when theatres can reopen, and whether or not there will be localised restrictions in place following the lockdown, has made planning tours particularly challenging. Understandably, many producers are nervous about taking the plunge - and possibly facing a big financial hit should anything go wrong.

So, it's remarkably cheering to see a theatre tour announced - and on sale - for 2021. Co-producers Rob Fennah and Bill Elms are remounting their tour of *By The Waters Of Liverpool*, which played at three of its planned 17 venues last year before the March shutdown.

All being well, it will open this September at the Lowther Pavilion in Lytham St Annes, Lancashire, and continue on to numerous towns and cities, including Darlington, Warrington, Bolton, Stockport, Halifax, Coventry, Winchester and Malvern - playing 75 performances at 18 theatres in all.

It is a gamble, notes Fennah, but "we're used to grafting - we're not rich, we're not [Andrew Lloyd Webber](#). Sometimes when we put shows on we win, sometimes we lose. But unless you throw your name in that hat, you're not going to win anything."

His hope is to "pull through this tour, and if we break even, we'll be happy - we'll live to fight another day." But most important, he feels, is to "play a leading part in bringing confidence back to theatre. The best way to do that isn't talking about it - it's doing it." That means "coming back with a bloody great tour," even if it costs them "a fortune."



The 2020 tour of *By The Waters Of Liverpool* was cut short by the pandemic | CREDIT: Anthony Robling

It's a brave move, considering they already have losses to offset from the curtailed 2020 tour - with investments "in pre-production costs, VAT, transport, paying the cast and crew, which we didn't get a chance to recoup. All the box office money was returned to ticket-holders, quite rightly. It's hundreds of thousands at least to do a tour like this."

They didn't benefit from the Culture Recovery Fund, despite applying, says Fennah, but did get a business loan, which they've "ploughed straight back in" to this tour.

Many producers still think it's too soon to make plans. But Fennah says they were already plotting a comeback last August, even before the vaccine rollout news - initially thinking March 2021, but then deciding they wouldn't have enough time to plan and market the run. "We took hope out of the equation and got realistic."

Fennah also points out that tours take months of forward planning, and venues can get booked up. "If people don't go for it now, there will be a lot of producers, actors and crew who haven't planned to work, and so there'll be sitting there for another year. It's best to get your diary full now."

Besides, September, he predicts, is "when things will have settled down. My personal belief is that by the end of summer, the pandemic will be a thing of the past as far as our plans go." That means not just the return of theatre - but theatre with full audiences, and none of the restrictions or safety measures that were introduced with lockdowns and tiers.

It's a big call, but Fennah has reason to believe it's the right one. "One of my friends is working on the Oxford vaccine. We've spoken about how everybody in the vulnerable categories - and our audiences do fall on the mature side - they're nearly all vaccinated as we speak. By September, that should be all of us. So there's no reason not to go about life normally. As long as there's no problem with the rollout, I don't see why people can't go to the theatre without restrictions."

That view is in stark contrast to epidemiologist Tim Spector from King's College London, who [recently said](#) that restrictions on large gatherings - as well as measures like handwashing and face masks - could be in place "for the next few years".



'I don't see why people can't go to the theatre without restrictions': By The Waters Of Liverpool will resume its tour in September | CREDIT: Anthony Robling

That is “twaddle”, rebuts Fennah firmly. Just because someone is “scientifically astute” doesn’t mean they can’t get it wrong, he adds. “If the vaccine works, as all the data says it does, then why are you saying such nonsense? What are you worried about?”

If it’s new variants, the alarm has been exaggerated, he thinks. His friend from the Oxford vaccine team used the analogy of a tennis ball with fine hairs on it. “Just four or five of the hairs will change with a variant, but the vaccine will still recognise the tennis ball. He says they make modifications all the time for vaccines like flu.

“Also, he told me that instead of the Government drip-feeding them funds and getting bogged down in bureaucratic delays over years, as usually happens with vaccines and research, they’ve given scientists the money all at once and put them at the front of the queue. It just shows what can be achieved. And we’ve definitely got the brains in this country to make us safe.”

What if something happens during the autumn tour, like another local lockdown? “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” says Fennah. Many of his colleagues are calling for Government-backed insurance. “That would be great, of course. Commercial insurance is going to be impossible for a while. The premiums would outweigh what you would make.”

As for social distancing, it only works “if you’ve got a one-woman show with no set.” Otherwise, “shows just don’t operate at 50 per cent capacity. You’re making a loss, unless you then charge the audience 50 per cent more for tickets or slash everyone’s wages 50 per cent - which of course we’re not going to do.”

He argues strongly that theatre should be able to have full audiences by September - and that no one need even wear a mask. "If the vaccine is working and you're not going to catch it, then what's the point? You might be sitting next to someone with hepatitis B, or flu - are you not going to go out until you've got a jab for everything? We live with these things all the time. We need to take the paranoia out of it."

If we really believe in the success of our vaccine programme, he adds, why would we need to continue social distancing? There is no scientific rationale for it. "Either we're now safe or we're not," Fennah states. That means the arguments for restrictions "become irrelevant". More important is to help communities "who aren't sure about the vaccine and dispel their fears. I've had the vaccine, and I would insist that all my cast and crew have it - they're not coming on tour otherwise."



'I would insist that all my cast and crew have the vaccine': Rob Fennah on *By The Waters Of Liverpool* | CREDIT: Anthony Robling

What about audiences - should they have to show proof of vaccination before entering a theatre? "[Getting the vaccine is] their freedom of choice. I'd say 'Please do have it', I'd hate to see anyone falling ill. But it's going to come down to personal responsibility."

What if there is a minor outbreak linked to a theatre performance? That's been avoided so far because of safety measures. "Well, if, say, seven people got it, I'd ask if those seven people had been vaccinated. If the answer is no, whose fault is that? You can't blame the theatre."

Of course, it can only be a personal choice if the Government lifts all restrictions. Fennah is firmly in favour of this. "If they did try to keep any rules, like capacity caps, I'd be saying does the vaccine not work as well as they keep saying - otherwise how could they possibly do that? You can't have it both ways. If the death rate falls, and we can see the number vaccinated rise, then we can plot a return to life as we knew it. You can't argue with the maths."

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Besides, he believes that people will be “queuing up to get back into theatres. Maybe a holiday first, then theatre! Everything is going to be back to normal a lot sooner than we think.”

The proof of that will be in sales for *By The Waters Of Liverpool*, Fennah’s latest adaptation of Helen Forrester’s four-part autobiography. The pair met in the late 1980s, when Fennah (who is also a musician) used a line from her book *Twopence Cross The Mersey* - describing her father, who lost his fortune during the Great Depression - “butterfly in the rain” as inspiration for a song. Forrester liked the track, and asked to use it when promoting her books.



Author Helen Forrester's 'story of survival' should inspire audiences, believes Rob Fennah

He then persuaded Forrester to let him option her work for stage, resulting in a musical version of *Twopence Cross The Mersey*. It was rejigged as a straight play, making it easier to tour, and Fennah has returned to Forrester’s books for *By The Waters Of Liverpool* - the title inspired by the second volume, but weaving in elements from all of them.

The tour began at the Floral Pavilion Theatre in New Brighton in March 2020, near Forrester's family home; a blue plaque was unveiled there a week earlier. "But even then, we had one eye on the news," recalls Fennah. "People were being quarantined at Arrowe Park Hospital nearby - the Wirral was in the headlines for all the wrong reasons."

By the time they reached their third tour stop, in Warrington, "the theatre manager was saying we had great numbers [in ticket sales], but are you aware that 25 per cent of people who'd booked didn't show? Then we knew the writing was on the wall."

Oddly, the play itself resonates with these tough times. It's set in the 1930s, after Forrester's father went bankrupt and the family moved to Liverpool. She was taken out of school to look after her younger siblings, leading to a bitter fight for the right to go out and work and gain her independence.

Fennah hugely admires Forrester for "her tenacity. Despite everything that was thrown at her, she went on to become this hugely successful author. It's a story of survival. You haven't lost until you give up - that's the same with us now. I know she'd be standing behind us, saying 'Go for it!'"

They are having to rethink their usual marketing methods. "Ordinarily, we'd have paper flyers in all the theatres and in the supermarkets in the area. But everything's closed, and people are afraid of picking up a flyer. So we're having to be imaginative, and do more online. But we're just happy to be getting back on the horse. And I hope we're the first of many."

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