

# How to pitch to festivals, with Steph Walker

Wednesday 15 November, 5.30 – 7.30pm

Toi Auaha, 5 Worcester Boulevard, Ōtautahi Christchurch central city

Festivals are often the lifeblood of performance practices, offering opportunities to travel and reach new audiences, often with marketing, production assistance and an artist fee attached. Aotearoa boasts arts festivals that run the length of the motu, from Dunedin's Fringe Festival and Wellington's Performance Arcade, to Splore north of Auckland as well as annual regional arts festivals. And we've all heard of the Edinburgh Fringe; Creative New Zealand has a dedicated initiative to help send NZ practitioners abroad to build international touring capabilities and professional development.

But where do you start? What differs between traditional proposals versus pitching to an arts festival? We are incredibly lucky to have Steph Walker join us to share her experience and insights from over a decade of programming, directing and producing a variety of festivals. This session will be especially useful for theatre, music and performance practitioners who would like to learn more about how to pitch to festivals both nationally and internationally. Let's get together and learn some tips on how to get your show on the road!

**Steph Walker** joined WORD as Executive Director in 2022. Prior to that she was Auckland Arts Festival's Head of Programming, and prior to that, spent 6 years in Australia. While away Steph worked at the Adelaide Festival, produced the OzAsia Festival amongst other events for the Adelaide Festival Centre; Sydney Festival; the City of Sydney's Art & About programme, and was Executive Director at Performance Space, Sydney. She has held leadership positions at Christchurch Arts Festival during the city's period of seismic activity (a professional and personal turning point); and at Wellington's iconic BATS Theatre. Steph is also a freelance arts consultant, sports fan, stress baker, and is on her te reo Māori learning journey.

# HOW TO PITCH TO FESTIVALS: Notes

## The idea is the easy bit - Interrogate what you're pitching

### WHY THIS

Why this place? Why this subject?

### WHY NOW

Is it urgent, timely, essential?

### WHY YOU

Is this your story to tell?

Is there a better person to tell this story?

Keep it brief. Essentially an elevator pitch. Best done in person or via zoom.

Don't delve into the process in your pitch unless it's a key part of the project and involves locals.

## Always put on three hats

### AUDIENCE HAT

#### What IS it?

What's the vibe? What's the genre?

Where does it fit within tradition and how does it differ?

Eg: is it a circus show in the round with clowns or kids or are they scary clowns that do burlesque? Is it a politically loaded poetry show or an uplifting musical performance with a light show? You need to be able to describe it succinctly.

#### Who is your audience?

Hone it down; don't say "everyone" - this substantially weakens the pitch.

Is it a bit sexy - will it suit a date night? Family friendly? Will it appeal to folks who dance?

#### What emotions and experiences will the audience have?

Will they learn something? See from a different perspective? Cry? Laugh? Key takeaways for the audience.

### PRODUCER HAT

#### Is the show tourable?

Is it too site specific? Is it tourable as it is right now?

#### Is it scalable?

How big is it? Can you make it a one person tour, hire local talent or do you need a crew?

### **How much budget does it need?**

How much time is required to set it up? Hours? Days? Who else is involved? Technical requirements? Is it sponsorable?

### **Resourcing the show**

What sort of space do you need to show it? Do you need aerial rigging, lighting and sound, power? What's your tech rider? What can you bring with you vs what sound/props/set/lights do you need supplied?

Some people have green riders - ie: sustainability, no bottled water and need for borrowed props

### **Local engagement opportunities**

Are there other local engagement opportunities that you could offer on top of the show?  
ie: workshops, schools programmes, artist talk or a gala show

## **RESEARCH HAT**

### **The Dad Test**

Send your pitch to a dad to see if he understands it.

### **Which festivals does your work suit?**

Local, national, international? English speaking? Regional/rural vs urban? Which genres/artforms? When? Where? Are there friends you can stay with? Do they align with your values?

How much support do you need from the festival?

ie: Fringe Festivals operate as an umbrella organisation and leave you to it, whereas others offer payment and production assistance.

### **Talk to friends and fellow practitioners**

Take note of where other NZ artists have performed - hope that they've made a good impression and ride on their coat tails ;)

### **Research - make use of google!**

It's not just festivals - some arts centres are also putting great events on.

Look into loads of options and funnel it down

## **AN ACTIVITY**

Write about your project in 50 words or less.  
Step away from it for an hour, a day or week.  
Come back to it.  
Does it make sense with your three hats on?

## Relational over transactional

- **Relationships and networks are treasures.**

Be nice to everyone. Be open to having conversations; you never know who you'll connect with.

- **This is for the long run.**

Remember that people move around in places and roles; your airport pick up volunteer could be the director of a festival in three years.

- **Be present, show up. Be in the room!**

It's relationships that will get the wins for you.

## What festival programmers are thinking

- Is this exciting?
- Will this help me meet my organisation's strategies, visions or goals?
- How much will it cost me? Is it sponsorable?
- Does this connect with our community?
- Is it better next year?
- Who are these people? What have they already been involved in? Are they good?

## THE PITCH

- Who are you
- What is your project
- What do you want for this project or what do you want from this festival? Do you want to be part of it this year? Do you want to tour your work? Do you want to get paid?
- Where does it shine?
- Why you, why this, why now?
- How does it connect with their community and how does it benefit them?
- What communities are they keen to reach? Deep dive into their annual reports, vision statement and values to get a feel for their vibe.
- What else can you offer? A show, a workshop, one for the kids

- How else could your project work? Are there different models and ways of working? Can you work with locals? Ie: especially for international travel, can it be a one person show vs ensemble?
- Do you have GOOD images or videos? Put it in the pitch. Only put the best bits forward - no subpar footage.
- Don't be desperate. Don't let them smell your fear.

If you're first meeting people or cold calling or emailing PERSONALISE the email. Know who they are, use their names. Check what they're up to ie: is it a busy time? Recent awards?

Know that there are a myriad of reasons they could say no that don't reflect on your show. Budget, timing, programming clashes,

Don't burn bridges! Ask for feedback, ask if they know of any other festival fits.

## HOT TIPS

- Try and get your mahi in front of people. Invite people! Invite big talkers!
- If you know someone in the industry who can vouch for your work, invite them to your show, give them comps and ask them to advocate for you.
- Make use of networks that you have in the city and in the sector
- Think laterally!

## FESTIVALS

### Some NZ Festivals:

Splore  
 Wanaka Festival of Colour  
 Taranaki Arts Festival  
 Aotearoa festival of the arts  
 Nelson Arts Festival  
 Dunedin Fringe  
 Buskers Festival Chch

Aotearoa NZ Festival of the Arts  
 Performance Arcade  
 WOMAD  
 Napier Art Deco Festival  
  
 Carterton Events Centre  
 Sir Howard Morrison Arts Centre

### Some Australian Festivals:

A list on [Wikipedia](#)

Each state in Australia has its own festival and personality - look them up!

Sydney - bold and brash

Darwin - outdoors, indigenous

Tasmania - 10 days on the Island, Dark

Mofo

Adelaide - eurocentric

Melbourne - Rising festival

Adelaide Fringe - very big and not known for looking after artists

## QUESTIONS

- **When you write a pitch, do you pop it in an email or make a phone call? How do you make the initial pitch?**

Ideally email the person and ask if they can meet you in person or via zoom.

Present face to face/via zoom or phone call

Send a follow up email with full pitch info/proposal

Remember to follow up! Emails get lost and subsumed, especially in busy inboxes. Don't feel bad for prodding.

- **What do you see as the biggest opportunities coming up?**

In NZ, looking at collaborations and how to make these more effective.

le: can you travel overseas and bring back knowledge or people to help with stuff back here.

- **Top 3 tips?**

Build relationships - Be kind to everyone, Make the most of every opportunity; have chats, be open and friendly.

Do you research

Know your work and what you do - don't be desperate; know your worth, be sure of yourself and what you do

Lateral thinking - don't limit yourself to a pigeon hole. Look into different, non traditional spaces and other audiences - conventions, conferences not just festivals.