



Press Release

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FACTORY INTERNATIONAL ANNOUNCES A SEASON OF PREMIERES AT AVIVA STUDIOS IN SPRING 2026

A major new exhibition by Ai Weiwei, a new dance work inspired by the life and music of Sinéad O'Connor, a performance piece by Sue Buckmaster Artistic Director of Theatre-Rites and award-winning choreographer Gregory Maqoma, and the UK premiere of Angel's Bone - brand new dance, theatre, art and music at Aviva Studios.

From **Ai Weiwei's** first ever major exhibition in the North to an intimate headline show from **Lily Allen**, from a striking new live performance from pioneering musician **Tricky** to visionary director **Kip Williams'** UK opera debut, **Factory International** has today announced a programme of new work for Spring 2026 featuring three World premieres and a UK premiere.

In collaboration with world leading artists and arts organisations Factory International, the organisation behind **Manchester International Festival** (MIF) and the city's landmark cultural space Aviva Studios, will present a season of large-scale new productions that span theatre, dance, music and visual art, utilising the versatility of Factory International's purpose-built home. Tickets will go on sale to members on Tuesday 20 January ahead of general on sale on Tuesday 27 January. Tickets are available from £10 across all shows.

- History, power and empire collide in a major new exhibition by world-leading artist and activist **Ai Weiwei**. Monumental in scale and ambition, ***Ai Weiwei: Button Up!*** confronts 200 years of turbulent world history in this vast new exhibition which centres on two major new commissions created especially for Aviva Studios, one of which will be his largest 2D artwork to date made from over a million toy bricks. (2 July–6 September).
- The World Premiere of ***The Surge: An Ode to Sinéad O'Connor***. Created by Tony award-winning choreographer and director **Sonya Tayeh**, the dance work is set to the music of **Sinéad O'Connor** and is a mediation on voice, protest and the courage to live a life that defies the norm performed by a company of 10 women. Presented by **Joyce Theater** and **Factory International** (25-27 June).

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- **Theatre-Rites** and award-winning South African Choreographer **Gregory Maqoma** will present the World Premiere of ***Return to the Forest***, an immersive, playful and thought-provoking new dance and puppetry show for families, co-produced by **Factory International** and co-commissioned by **Sadlers Wells East**. (7-10 May).
- The first in a series of new productions, **English National Opera** (ENO) and **Factory International** present the UK premiere of **Du Yun's** Pulitzer Prize-winning contemporary opera ***Angel's Bone*** - a major new production directed by the visionary theatre maker **Kip Williams**. In collaboration with the **BBC Philharmonic Orchestra** ***Angel's Bone*** is a powerful allegory exploring themes of exploitation, power, and the human cost of survival. (12-16 May)

John McGrath, Artistic Director and Chief Executive, Factory International said: "*This season we have a collection of firsts. We're proud to have Ai Weiwei's first major exhibition in the North of England, ENO's first production staged in Manchester and the first major production celebrating the music and life of Sinéad O'Connor. Factory International is collaborating with pioneering, fearless artists this Spring inviting them to use the flexibility and versatility of our extraordinary home Aviva Studios, as their playground to create work they could not make anywhere else. We welcome them to Manchester to push the boundaries of their practice and create at unprecedented scales imagining spectacles both intimate and ambitious for our audiences in the North and beyond.*"

Throughout the Spring, Aviva Studios - which has fast become a hub for music in the UK, recognised for its outstanding acoustics - will host a wide range of music performances from artists, bands and collectives that push at the limits of experimental electronics and indie music, alongside headline gigs from some of the world's biggest pop stars and DJ, including; platinum-selling artist **Halsey** celebrating ten years of ***BADLANDS*** (29 Jan); superstar DJ **Fatboy Slim** (13 - 14 March); Persian pop by **Aron Afshar** (20 Feb); a headline show from **Lily Allen** (10-11 Mar) who performs her No.1 selling album ***West End Girl*** in full; global pop star **Kesha** (13-14 Mar); Grammy-winning jazz-funk bassist **Thundercat** (27 Mar); a live set by dance royalty **Basement Jaxx** (28 Mar); trip-hop pioneer and Massive Attack co-founder **Tricky** (16 May); and indie trailblazers **Pixies** (24-25 May).

They run alongside a series of cutting-edge classical events, including the first collaboration outside MIF from **Manchester Collective**, who bring together a line-up of composers - **Arvo Pärt, Benjamin Britten, Henry Purcell, Mica Levi, Jasmine Morris** and **John Luther Adams** - for ***Sky With The Four Suns*** (8 Feb 2026); **ANNO** with **Anna Meredith** and the first time **The Hallé** comes to Aviva Studios (2 May); followed by the return of the **BBC Philharmonic** with the primal force of **Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*** (22 May).

One of the UK's largest cultural exporters, Factory International is creating and commissioning work in the North of England that is seen by audiences all over the world. **Marina Abramovic's** critically acclaimed masterpiece ***Balkan Erotic Epic*** which premiered at Aviva Studios in Autumn 2025, will begin a run of international dates starting later this month at Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona with further performance dates at Berliner Festspiele, Germany and Park Avenue Armory, New York in the Autumn. Other International Presentations for 2026 include **Germaine Kruij's *A Possibility*** which will run at Holland Festival and Parkstad Limburg Theaters in June following its World Premiere at MIF25 and composer **HUANG Ruo's *City of***

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Floating Sounds which was first presented around the streets of Manchester and at Aviva Studios in 2024.

In addition to the work commissioned and produced by established voices Factory International is committed to supporting artists at every stage of their career, including offering free, industry-focused training programmes through **Factory Academy**. Factory International's artist development initiatives, including their **Artist Takeover**, **Young Curators**, **Factory Sounds** and **Factory Fellowship** programmes will return this Spring. These initiatives offer practical support, including funding, mentoring, access to space to create, and training, to help break down the barriers many artists face when trying to access the resources they need to take their practice to the next level. **Factory International's Young Curators** - six young creatives from Manchester aged 30 and under - will collaborate with artist **Trackie McLeod** to create **UTOPIA** a working pub inside Aviva Studio's Warehouse which will operate as an exhibition, pub, drag bar, intimate music venue and workshop space from 19-21 February.

Also taking place in February is the fifth edition of **Factory International's Artist Takeover** initiative, which will see dancer and choreographer **Chad Taylor** receive financial and production support to experiment with project mapping at Aviva Studios over the course of a week. The ongoing **Artists In Times of Upheaval** talk series also returns this Spring, exploring new artistic projects and discussions emerging from artists' direct responses to global and national upheaval. Next in the series is a reading of **Resisters** a new play, currently in development by award-winning writer and performer **Mojisola Adebayo**, exploring queer and women's resistance to occupation, war and genocide through art.

New Shows for Spring 2026:

Return to the Forest (7-10 May) - WORLD PREMIERE

A Theatre Rites and Factory International co-production, co-commissioned by Sadler's Wells East.

A magical forest comes to life in a new puppetry and dance show for families created by **Theatre-Rites** and award-winning South African Choreographer **Gregory Maqoma**. Led by Maqoma's high-energy movement and the magical puppetry of Director Sue Buckmaster, **Return to the Forest** is an invitation to imagine what is precious and how we care for it. In an immersive, playful and thought-provoking encounter, precious objects transport audiences from a museum into the heart of a wild and magical forest, full of life and wonder.

Return to the Forest builds on Theatre-Rites and Maqoma's collaboration *The Global Playground* for Manchester International Festival 2021 (MIF21). Theatre-Rites previous work with Factory International also includes *The Welcome Party* for MIF17, whilst Maqoma collaborated with Idris Elba and Kwame Kwi-Armah on *Tree* for MIF19.

Sue Buckmaster and **Gregory Maqoma** said: *"We are both so thrilled to be co-creating Return to the Forest and reuniting with Factory International in this next chapter of our collaboration. Manchester holds a special place for us as artists. This production is deeply connected to themes of renewal and resilience, and there is no better city and audience with*

whom to share its spirit. Our partnership continues to be a source of inspiration, and we look forward to creating another unforgettable experience together."

Angel's Bone (12 - 16 May) - UK PREMIERE

Produced by English National Opera in collaboration with Factory International, BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and Kantos Chamber Choir.

English National Opera (ENO) in collaboration with **Factory International**, the **BBC Philharmonic Orchestra** with **Kantos Chamber Choir** will present the UK premiere of **Du Yun's** Pulitzer Prize-winning **Angel's Bone** at Aviva Studios. Visionary theatre maker **Kip Williams** makes his ENO and UK opera debut with this major new production.

An evocative contemporary opera that combines a bold fusion of musical styles and artforms, bringing together punk rock, opera, cabaret, electronics, theatre and chamber music, *Angel's Bone* is a powerful, dark fable that delves deep into the harrowing realities of modern-day slavery and human trafficking.

Internationally acclaimed for his bold boundary-pushing work, Williams will join forces with Designer **Marg Horwell** reuniting the creative partnership behind *The Picture of Dorian Gray* starring Sarah Snook (2024), for which Horwell received the Olivier Award for Best Costume Design, and the forthcoming production of *Dracula* starring Cynthia Erivo.

Kip Williams, Director of Angel's Bone, says: *'I am thrilled to be directing Angel's Bone for English National Opera and to premiere this work at the remarkable Aviva Studios with Factory International. Du Yun and Royce Vavrek have created a visionary and urgent piece, and it's an honour to stage this boundary-pushing opera for British audiences for the first time.'*

The Surge: An Ode to Sinéad O'Connor (25-27 June) - WORLD PREMIERE

A Joyce Theater and Factory International production

Tony award-winning choreographer and director **Sonya Tayeh** presents the World Premiere of a new dance work set to the music of **Sinéad O'Connor**.

Presented in partnership with **Joyce Theater** and **Factory International** *The Surge: An Ode to Sinéad O'Connor* is a meditation on voice, protest and the courage to live a life that defies the norm. O'Connor's voice guides us through the work, via her iconic music and narration from her memoir *Remembering's* with Tayeh's powerfully choreography performed by a company of ten women - ten dance artists cutting through the notion of age as something to fear.

The Surge is conceived, choreographed and directed by Sonya Tayeh – a creative visionary whose work relating to the body in motion explores many different worlds. An internationally celebrated artist, she is the dance backbone behind numerous stage and screen projects, most notably *Moulin Rouge: The Musical!*, for which she won the Tony Award for outstanding choreography. Her work powerfully weaves together different styles – creating onstage worlds

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celebrated for her chameleon-like choreography and ability to adapt her storytelling to any scale.

Director and choreographer Sonya Tayeh said: *“To me, Sinéad O’Connor’s music is rooted in a sense of a desire for freedom, an unrelenting righteousness and a quest for a spiritual awakening. The depth of emotion in her music is unmatched and vibrates through the dance space with such electric inspiration for me and has for decades now. I am so grateful to be working with ten women across many genres of the art form – from dance scholars and makers to teachers and seekers – to join me in the howl. To join me in The Surge.”*

***Ai Weiwei: Button Up!* (2 July – 6 September) - WORLD PREMIERE**

Internationally renowned artist and activist **Ai Weiwei** turns his critical gaze to the last 200 years of global history with a major new exhibition ***Ai Weiwei: Button Up!***. Monumental in scale and ambition the exhibition interrogates the legacies of British imperialism, Chinese and British relations and the rise of globalisation. Taking inspiration from Manchester, a city at the heart of the Industrial Revolution, ***Button Up!*** explores how historic systems of trade, empire and exploitation resonate in today’s humanitarian and political crises.

Both global and personal, the title ***Button Up!*** is a playful poke at the artist’s ongoing battle with censorship. Conceived as a total environment, the exhibition brings together new and existing large scale works on display in the UK for the first time, incorporating a wide range of materials associated with both craft and industry such as antique timber, porcelain, cotton, glass and bronze.

Central to the exhibition are two major new commissions created especially for the vast Warehouse space at Aviva Studios: the world premiere of ***Eight-Nation Alliance Flags***, which **is made from hundreds of thousands of buttons**, and a new version of ***History Of Bombs***, Ai Weiwei’s largest 2D artwork to date, stretching just under 30 meters wide and **made from over a million toy bricks**. ***Button Up!*** immerses visitors in Ai Weiwei’s fearless interrogation of the forces past and present that drive today’s injustices – while championing art’s enduring power to challenge and inspire.

Known for his uncompromising artistic vision and political activism, Ai Weiwei’s life has been marked by periods of exile, surveillance, secret detention and ongoing resistance. His wide-ranging practice is rooted in storytelling and critical inquiry, encompassing sculpture, installation, film, photography, writing and architecture.

Ai Weiwei said: *“I’m not interested in making very big things just for the sake of it. But in Manchester, that wonderful Warehouse space calls for monumental work. Visiting the city for this exhibition – the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution – and reflecting on Britain’s global territorial expansion made me realise I had to explore that history and understand how it connects to the forces driving today’s wars and global crises. The world today is deeply divided, with tragedy all around. Understanding history goes hand in hand with standing up for truth and justice.”*

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LISTINGS INFORMATION

Return to the Forest (7-10 May)

Press Night: 7 May

A Theatre Rites and Factory International co-production, co-commissioned by Sadler's Wells East.

Angel's Bone (12 - 16 May)

Press Night: 12 May

Produced by English National Opera in collaboration with Factory International, BBC Philharmonic Orchestra with Kantos Chamber Choir.

The Surge: An Ode to Sinéad O'Connor (25-27 June)

Press Night: 25 June

A Joyce Theater and Factory International production

Ai Weiwei: Button Up! (2 July – 6 September)

Press View. 1 July

NOTES TO EDITORS:

About

Factory International is the organisation behind Manchester International Festival and the city's landmark cultural space, Aviva Studios.

Factory

International

Factory International commissions, produces and presents a year-round programme of original creative work and special events at Aviva Studios, online, and internationally through its network of co-commissioners and partners. It also stages the city-wide Manchester International Festival (MIF) every other year.

Factory International builds on the legacy of Manchester International Festival, one of the world's leading arts festivals, and the first to be entirely focused on the commissioning and producing of ambitious new work. Staged every two years in Manchester since 2007, world-renowned artists from different art forms and backgrounds create dynamic, innovative and forward-thinking new work in venues and spaces across Greater Manchester.

Aviva Studios was designed by the world-leading practice Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), with Ellen van Loon as lead architect – their first major public building in the UK. Its development was led by Manchester City Council, with backing from HM Government and National Lottery funding from Arts Council England.

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Ultra-flexible in design, the building is based around large, open, adaptable spaces that can be constantly reconfigured, enabling artists to develop and create large-scale work of invention and ambition of a kind not seen anywhere else in the world. A unique canvas to make, explore and experiment, audiences can enjoy the broadest range of art forms - from major exhibitions and concerts to intimate performances and immersive experiences.

Factory International plays an important role in the lives of Greater Manchester residents, bringing jobs, skills, training and creative opportunities. Through the Factory Academy, Factory International is training the creative workforce of the future, while its pioneering creative engagement and artist development programmes create year-round opportunities for local people to get involved, from participating in flagship commissions to shaping the organisation through involvement in its public forums.

Factory International is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.
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About Arts Council England

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. Our vision, set out in our strategy *Let's Create*, is that by 2030, we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish, and where every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. Between 2023 and 2026 we will have invested over £467 million of public money from Government, alongside an estimated £250 million each year from The National Lottery, to help ensure that people in every part of the country have access to culture and creativity in the places where they live. Until Autumn 2025, the National Lottery is celebrating its 30th anniversary of supporting good causes in the United Kingdom: since the first draw was held in 1994, it has raised £49 billion and awarded more than 690,000 individual grants.

Visit [our website](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk) to learn more about our work.