

*interactions

creative strategies for business

Arts Council Consultation Process

Meeting on Production Companies
12 April 2005

Production Companies

Tuesday 12 April 2005, 2.30pm – 5.30pm, Granary Theatre Cork

Stephanie O'Callaghan welcomed the attendees on behalf of The Arts Council and contextualised the discussion.

1. Questions for discussion

The meeting discussed the following questions:

What are the challenges facing production companies in terms of matching production, funding and presentation cycles between production companies, venues and funders and how can this be addressed?

What are the challenges facing Irish performing artists in the areas of professional development, employment and presentation opportunities?

What are the challenges for production companies in the areas of marketing and audience development?

What are optimum models for resourcing production companies?

2. In discussing the question, the following emerged.

2.1 Production cycles, funding and presentation cycles

It was suggested that the topic for discussion is of particular relevance in Cork at this time. Because of Cork 2005, venues in Cork are completely booked out and have almost no flexibility this year. Companies suggested that there are issues with venues around the level of detail required prior to booking a show and unwillingness to commit to making a booking: it is very difficult to find venues that can present work, unless there is a long lead in period. Present funding systems mean that it is difficult for a company to be responsive to opportunities when producing work. Additionally, companies generally felt that they often

have to plan productions in advance of knowing their financial position and they cannot access flexible funding to make work. One of the more established company directors explained how he had learned to be pragmatic in the face of funding uncertainties and continually makes contingency plans to accommodate this. Many companies felt there was conflict between wanting to have stability around core funds and wishing to be able to access project funding that was more flexibly and simply structured. For more established companies, creative decisions are inextricably linked to their financial position, whereas there is a sense that the younger companies will do it on a shoestring rather than stop the work because of lack of funds.

2.2 Venues, marketing, and audiences

It was agreed that there is disharmony between venues and production companies and there was a request that the Arts Council incentivise companies to collaborate with venues to focus on issues around audience development. Venues usually know their audiences very well and a more experienced venue manager will know/have access to information and touring networks, and will be able to judge when and where to present work.

It was suggested that it is important to recognise that there are various audiences, not just one homogenised group for each venue. One of the reasons why a company might not want to tour or present in a particular venue is because of apathy or disinterest, whereas the company will want to visit a venue that markets the work and makes them feel welcome or connected to audience. A key question emerging from this discussion was - should the responsibility for marketing fall to the company and is this something that companies will analyse for themselves, post-production?

It was suggested that while some companies implicitly go through this process, there is no specific requirement from the Arts Council to undergo this kind of rigorous self-assessment. If the company is engaged in participatory practice, then the audience is key to the process and this helps to connect people to venues.

It was noted that many venues have a distinctive identity and certain audiences will only see work if it is in a certain venue. One example included Opera Theatre Company performing in the Everyman Palace to poor audiences – the ‘opera crowd’ don’t go to the Everyman and weren’t prepared to follow the company. One company has decided not to tour work unless there is some integral artistic reason to do so. The idea of venue managers seeing work before they book it was discussed and welcomed as an ideal model however, this seems to be an almost impossible system to establish or regulate at the moment.

2.3 Professional development

Opportunities to travel and see other work was considered to be an essential part of ongoing professional development and greater flexibility was required in some of the existing funds offered by the Arts Council, to enable travel to build all kinds of professional expertise such as dancing, teaching, choreography, marketing etc. Festivals, rather than direct training initiatives, are considered to provide excellent opportunities to share skills and experiences.

There was a general feeling that one of the most important steps that the Arts Council has taken is to employ artform experts and specialists, and that in the very best situations these specialists have been in a position to dialogue with artists and producers about standards of practice, to give information and suggestions about whom else to talk to.

It was also suggested that if the Arts Council is to fulfil this potential role as advisor to artists and artistic directors, then it needs to resource this effectively and consistently across all art forms and arts practices. This prompted discussions about the Arts Council evaluating the quality of work and the need for the arts sector to assist in generating effective frameworks for that evaluation. It was accepted that there is a lack of discussion both within and across sectors in relation to quality as they each operate in a competitive environment it was agreed that this issue could usefully be highlighted in the Arts Council's strategy.

2.4 The role of The Arts Council

- To provide funding packages that are both responsive and strategic.
- To provide advice and support (beyond funding-led conversations).
- To support a more strategic relationship with venues and festivals.

- To create opportunities for greater access to administrative facilities that may exist in venues.
- To act as an honest broker, adviser in terms of evaluating and assessing work and development issues.