



# Socio-Economic Conditions of Theatre Practitioners in Ireland

## Executive Summary

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## INTRODUCTION

This study was commissioned by the Arts Council at the end of 2004 and undertaken by Hibernian Consulting between February and September 2005. The centrepiece of the study was a survey of Irish theatre practitioners carried out between April and July 2005. Its aim was to assemble an evidence base on the economic and social conditions of Irish theatre practitioners and to do so in a way that would provide baseline data to allow future comparative studies to be undertaken. This is the first such study undertaken in Ireland.

This Executive Summary presents key findings of the study. Further findings, details on the survey methodology and references are available in the full study report.

## DEFINITION OF THEATRE PRACTITIONERS

For the purposes of the study, the Arts Council defined theatre practitioners as coming from the following occupational areas:

1. Performing artists:
  - Actors
  - Dancers/choreographers in theatre productions
2. Production artists:
  - Playwrights
  - Directors
  - Designers (lighting/set/sound/costume)
3. Technical and managerial practitioners:
  - Technicians
  - Stage managers and production managers
  - Producers

As well as belonging to these occupational areas, the practitioners surveyed were people who:

- Had been active in their specialist area of activity in 2004;
- Had worked in theatre for at least two years, i.e. were established as theatre practitioners;
- Saw working in theatre as their main profession or career;
- Operated as freelance practitioners, which is the norm for over 80% of Irish theatre practitioners.

## STUDY METHOD

The study began with a review of international and Irish literature relating to the socio-economic conditions of artists. This both informed the design of the survey questionnaire and provided a context to interpret the survey results.

Design of the survey questionnaire was also informed by discussion with the Arts Council Theatre Specialist and the Information and Research Officer, and with the following organisations:

- Association of Professional Dancers in Ireland (APDI);
- Associated Theatre Artists (ATA);
- Irish Actors Equity;
- Irish Playwrights' and Screenwriters' Guild;
- Theatre Forum;
- Theatre Shop.

The support of these organisations allowed for estimates to be built of the total population of theatre practitioners. It was estimated that there are approximately 900 Irish practitioners who meet the criteria set out above. Interviews

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were undertaken with 195 of these practitioners. The targeting of these interviews was decided upon in light of the population estimates reached for the sub-groups of practitioners.

Draft findings of the study were reviewed with the Arts Council Theatre Specialist and the Information and Research Officer, as well as with the Arts Council's Artists' Service Manager (responsible for programmes to support individual artists) and the Dance Specialist.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THEATRE PRACTITIONER POPULATION

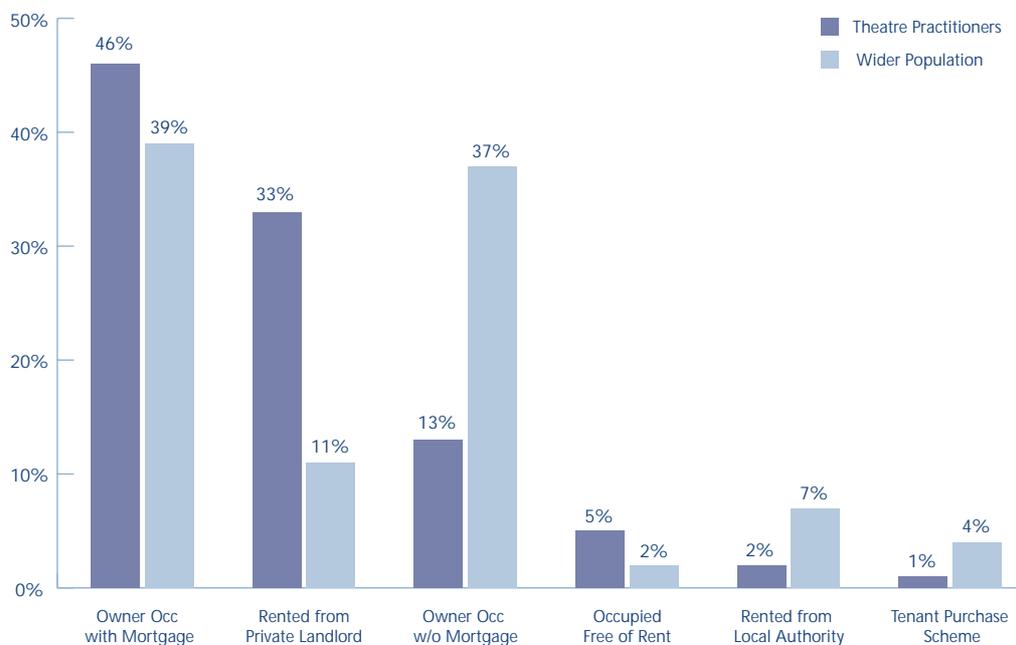
Based on the survey respondents, the age profile of theatre practitioners was found to be similar to that of the wider labour force, with approximately one-third of practitioners aged under 34; one-third aged 35-44 and one-third aged over 45. The gender profile was also similar to the wider labour force:

- 56% of theatre practitioners surveyed were male and 44% female;
- 58% of the wider labour market is male and 42% female.

The survey indicated a fall-off in the number of female practitioners after the age of 40. The theatre/dance resource organisations said that this may reflect a lack of character roles for female actors aged over 40, as well as family commitments.

Data on the nature of occupancy of accommodation indicates that 59% of theatre practitioners live in owner-occupied houses (with or without a mortgage). However, theatre practitioners are less likely to own their home and more likely to be renting compared to the population as a whole. Figure 1 shows that 33% of theatre practitioners said they were renting from a private landlord, whereas the figure for 2002 for the population as a whole was 11%<sup>1</sup>

FIGURE 1: NATURE OF OCCUPANCY: THEATRE PRACTITIONERS AND WIDER POPULATION



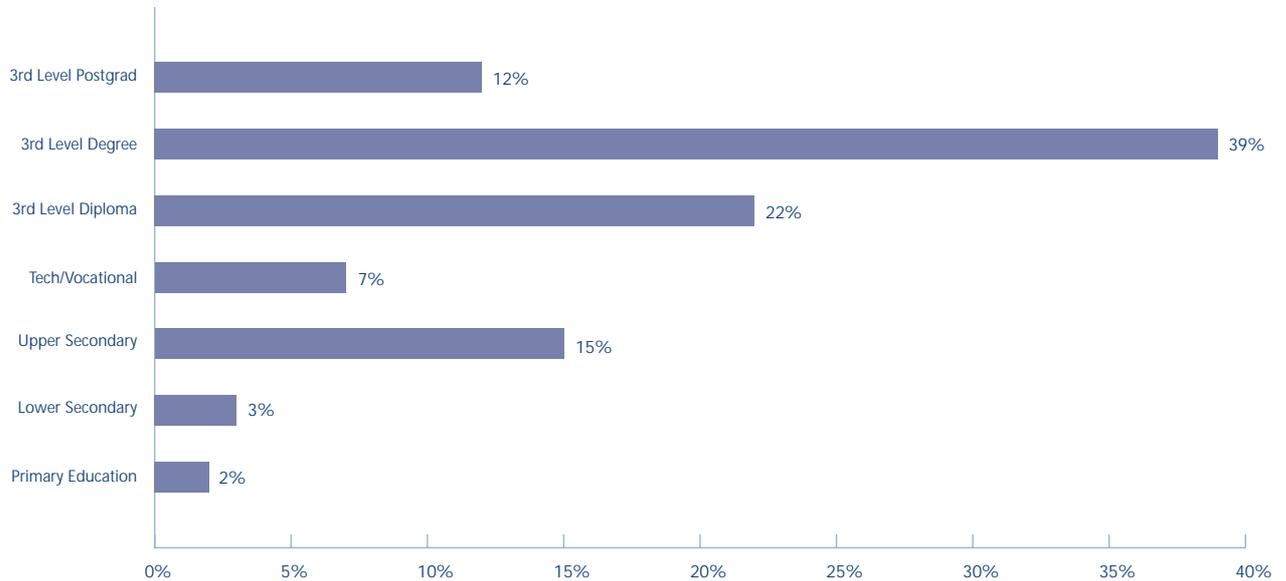
Based on 195 Respondents

<sup>1</sup>These two figures do not directly compare like with like as the figure for the population as a whole (from the Census) incorporates more older people, who are more likely to own their own home.

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Figure 2 shows a breakdown of practitioners by highest level of education attained.

FIGURE 2: HIGHEST COMPLETED EDUCATION OF THEATRE PRACTITIONER



Based on 192 Respondents

Figure 2 shows that 73% of practitioners have a third level qualification. This compares to 28% of the wider labour force. Theatre practitioners therefore constitute a relatively well-educated segment of the Irish labour force.

The formal education of theatre practitioners is supplemented by private classes, on-the-job learning and other ongoing training:

- Some 83% of practitioners consider ongoing training as “important” or “very important” to career development.
- 37% had engaged in relevant training in 2004. This suggests a gap between the amount of continuous training that people would like and the amount they undertake.
- Some 78% of practitioners believed there are insufficient opportunities available for continuing training and professional development.

## WORK PATTERN OF THEATRE PRACTITIONERS

To get an indication of the proportion of theatre practitioners working in theatre at a given time, respondents were asked if they had worked in any role in theatre in the week prior to the survey interview:

- One-third of practitioners had worked in theatre for the whole of the week;
- One-fifth had worked in theatre for part of the previous week;
- The remainder (47%) had not worked in theatre at all in the previous week.

There was considerable variation between practitioner types (using the groupings set out earlier):

- Some 64% of technical and managerial practitioners worked for the whole of the previous week in theatre;
- The equivalent figure for production artists was 47%;

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- Only 23% for performing artists worked for the whole of the previous week in theatre, and 63% did not work at all in theatre in the week prior to the survey.

Practitioners were asked to break down their activity for 2004. Table 1 shows this breakdown, measured in weeks, for six types of activity – work in a practitioner's main specialist area; theatre work outside their main specialist area; arts work outside theatre; work outside the arts; periods of unemployment and other activities (e.g. maternity leave, illness or holidays).

TABLE 1: AVERAGE BREAKDOWN OF ACTIVITY FOR 2004 YEAR - FOR ALL THEATRE PRACTITIONERS AND FOR PRACTITIONER SUB-GROUPS (WEEKS)				
	Performing Artists	Production Artists	Technical and Managerial	Overall Average
Main Specialist Area	16	24	33	20
Other Theatre	3	9.5	3	5
Other Arts Work	8.5	6	5.5	8
Work Not Related to Arts	8	3	3.5	6
Unemployed	11	4.5	3.5	8
Non-work Activities	5.5	5	3.5	5
Total	52	52	52	52

NOTE: *Performing Artists* include actors and dancers/choreographers in theatre productions; *Production Artists* include playwrights, directors and designers; *Technical and Managerial Practitioners* include technicians; stage managers and production managers; and producers

The final column of Table 1 indicates that, in 2004, the average theatre practitioner:

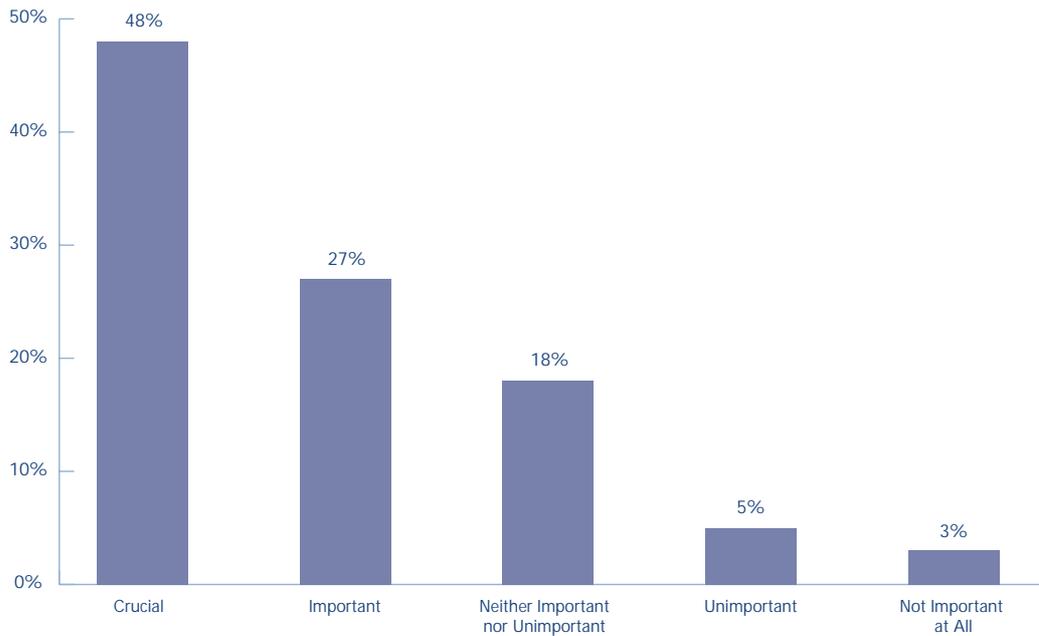
- Worked for 20 weeks in their main specialist area of theatre activity;
- Supplemented this with almost 5 weeks of other work in theatre, meaning that almost half of the year was spent in theatre work;
- Spent about 14 weeks in other employment, giving a total number of weeks worked of 38;
- Experienced an average of 8 weeks of unemployment;
- Spent 5 weeks engaged in non-work activities.

Table 1 shows significant variation as between the three sub-groups of practitioners. The survey indicates that the average performing artist obtains less work in theatre and spends more time out of work than other theatre practitioners. Analysis of the data also shows considerable variation by individual. For example, 5% of practitioners had no work in their main specialist area of theatre in 2004.

Theatre practitioners were asked about work in areas that link to their theatre work. Some 76% of respondents said they work in either film, TV or radio drama, and 54% do other commercial or media work. Figure 3 shows the importance of this work to practitioners.

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FIGURE 3: EXTENT OF IMPORTANCE OF OTHER RELATED MEDIA WORK TO THEATRE PRACTITIONERS



Based on 151 Responses

Figure 3 shows that 75% of respondents consider such work as important or crucial to support their career in theatre. Performing artists (actors and dancers) are most likely to rate such work as critical to their theatre career.

Other data on the work pattern of theatre practitioners showed:

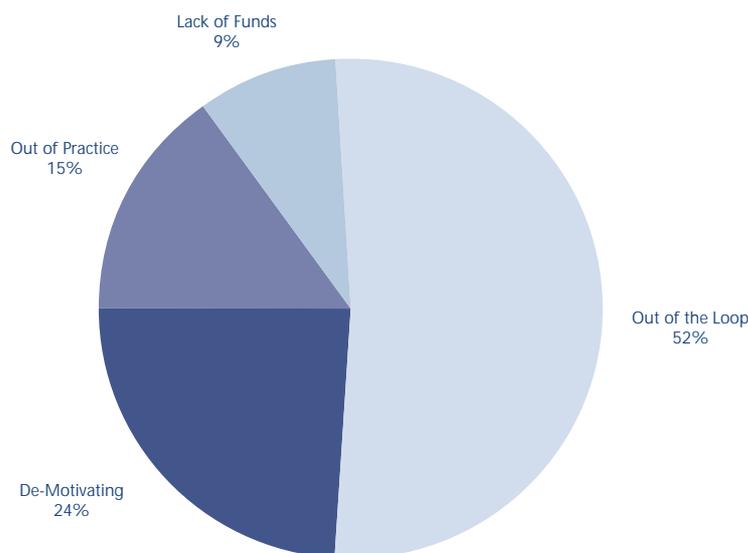
- There is a large variation in the number of hours worked – 31% had worked over 45 hours in the last week in which they had worked in their main specialist area;
- One-third of practitioners undertook unpaid work in their last week working in their main specialist area – given the prevalence of fixed fee contracts, this may understate the unpaid work undertaken;
- Just under one-third of practitioners worked abroad in 2004.

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## UNEMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL WELFARE

Table 1 indicated that unemployment is a normal part of a theatre practitioner's working life. Some two-thirds of practitioners said that being unemployed had held back their career development, and the reasons for this are shown in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: HOW BEING UNEMPLOYED MOST HINDERS CAREER DEVELOPMENT



Based on 65 Responses.

The main reason unemployment damages career development is "being out of the loop". Several practitioners commented that "work generates work", partly because work generates critical reviews and raises a practitioner's profile.

Practitioners were asked about three specific problems that had been mentioned by the theatre sector stakeholder organisations as arising from time-to-time:

- 31% were aware of variations in treatment of theatre practitioners by different Social Welfare offices;
- 24% had been required to re-train or to apply for alternative jobs during periods of unemployment;
- 19% had been threatened by removal of their benefits at one point or another.

These answers indicate that the problems cited by the resource organisations do exist, although for a minority of practitioners.

## INCOME OF THEATRE PRACTITIONERS

The survey asked theatre practitioners about their incomes in 2004. Information was sought in relation to:

- Practitioners' income from their core specialist area of activity;
- Income from all work in theatre;
- Total personal income from all sources, i.e. including income from all work, social welfare and any other sources;
- Total household income, where different to the above.

The median income figures (the level below which 50% of the population is estimated to fall), for all theatre practitioners and for the three sub-groups, are shown in Table 2.

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	Overall	Performing Artists	Production Artists	Technical and Managerial
Income from Main Specialist Area	€7,200	€5,500	€10,500	€19,675
Income from all Theatre Work	€10,000	€7,000	€18,000	€20,400
Total Personal Income from all Sources	€22,000	€20,000	€25,800	€29,750
Household Income	€30,000	€26,900	€40,000	€38,000

NOTE: *Performing Artists* include actors and dancers/choreographers in theatre productions; *Production Artists* include playwrights, directors and designers; *Technical and Managerial Practitioners* include technicians; stage managers and production managers; and producers

Table 2 indicates that, for 2004, it is estimated that 50% of theatre practitioners earned less than €7,200 from work in their main specialist area. When all sources of income were included, it is estimated that 50% of practitioners earned under €22,000. The figures are lowest for performing artists (actors and dancers).

In the context of the data on levels of household income, one-third of practitioners said that they had another income coming into their household which was “steady” in nature. Just under half of this cohort (15% of all practitioners) said that they could not continue to stay in theatre without this financial support.

When the income of a theatre practitioner and the weeks worked by a practitioner (both for their main specialist area) are compared, this allows figures for average weekly wages to be calculated<sup>2</sup>. The survey data suggests an average weekly wage for all theatre practitioners (for their main specialist area) in 2004 of €513:

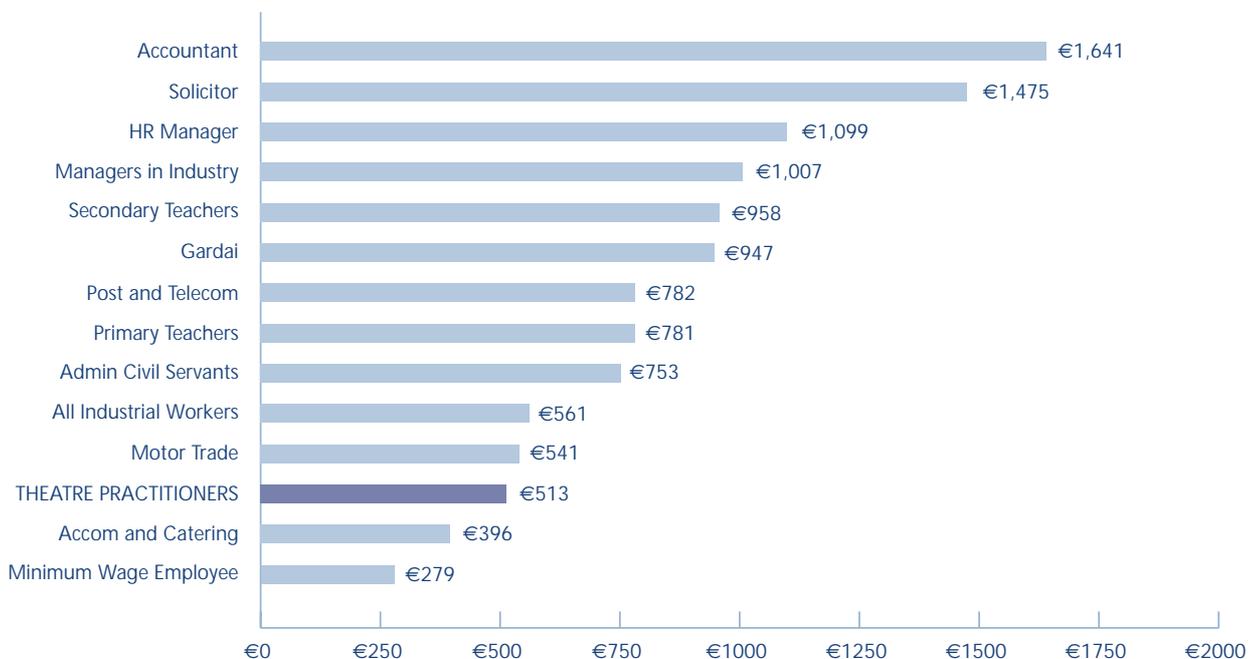
- Average weekly wage for a performing artist in 2004: €456;
- Average weekly wage for a production artist in 2004: €546;
- Average weekly wage for a technical/managerial practitioner in 2004: €713.

The average weekly wage figure for all theatre practitioners of €513 in 2004 is compared to average weekly wages for workers in a number of other economic sectors in Figure 5.

<sup>2</sup>This calculation was undertaken using mean income data – see Chapter 8 of the main report

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FIGURE 5: COMPARISON OF THEATRE PRACTITIONER AVERAGE WEEKLY WAGE (WORK IN MAIN AREA) WITH OTHER WORKERS IN THE ECONOMY, 2004



NOTE: Figure for accountant is the average for an accountant in the Leinster area who qualified between 1995 and 1999 and is working in industry and commerce. Figure for solicitor is the average for a solicitor working in practice in Dublin with seven years post-qualification experience

Figure 5 shows that the estimated average weekly wage for theatre practitioners in 2004, at €513, was 9% lower than the average industrial wage (at €561) and was lower than the wages earned in many other sectors of the economy.

## OTHER MEASURES OF STANDARD OF LIVING

Practitioners were asked a number of other questions about their standard of living:

- 43% did not take a *holiday* away from home in 2004 (not including staying in the home of a relative). This compares to 23% for the wider population;
- 53% of practitioners said their household has some level of difficulty "*making ends meet*", with 19% finding this "difficult" or "very difficult";
- 56% of practitioners said that they *save regularly*;
- 29% of practitioners had *been in arrears* on a household bill (e.g. rent, mortgage, electricity or gas) in the past year;
- 29% of theatre practitioners had a *personal pension* – this compares to a figure of 52% for the general population.

Given their atypical and uncertain work and income patterns, and the low levels of income earned, 45% of practitioners had experienced problems in getting a mortgage or a bank loan due to their status as a theatre practitioner. A slightly lower figure (37%) had had difficulty obtaining car insurance.

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## THEATRE PRACTITIONERS AND THE TAX SYSTEM

Tax issues arise for freelance theatre practitioners from the uncertain nature of their work and income, and from their varying employment status. Practitioners may pay tax as they go, if production companies pay them on a PAYE basis, or they may pay tax due on their income in the following year, accompanied by a tax return, or they may combine these options. The breakdown of tax status by age, is shown below.

Age of Practitioners	PAYE	Self-Employed	Combination	Total
Under 34	40	32	28	100
35-44	25	33	42	100
Aged over 45	12	42	46	100
Total	26	35	39	100

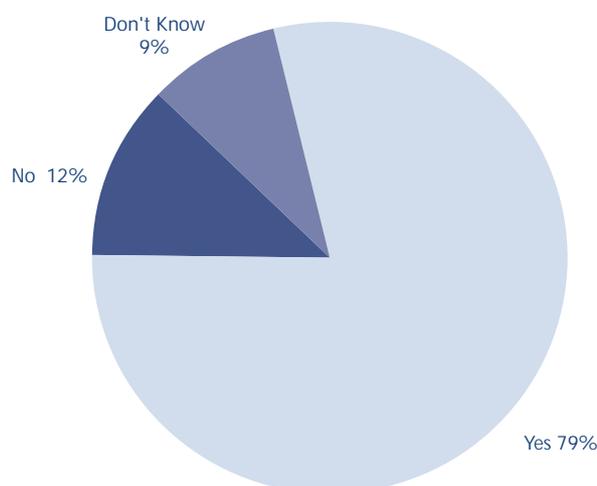
Table 3 shows that the older a theatre practitioner is, the more likely they are to have a tax status allowing them to work *both* as PAYE workers and on a self-employed basis (“Schedule D” status). The younger a practitioner is, the more likely they are to have PAYE status. This fits with the view of the theatre/dance sector resource organisations that the Revenue Commissioners prefer practitioners to work on a PAYE basis, and discourage younger practitioners from working on a Schedule D basis.

Some 20% or so of respondents had experienced other problems with the Revenue Commissioners (e.g. they said they did not find them to be understanding or had difficulties registering as self-employed).

## THEATRE PRACTITIONER VIEWS ON THEIR CAREERS

The survey ended with general questions about practitioners’ careers. Responses to the question: “Looking at the positives and negatives in your career, if you were starting over again, would you choose to work in theatre?” are shown in Figure 6.

FIGURE 6: WOULD THEATRE PRACTITIONERS CHOOSE TO WORK IN THEATRE IF STARTING OVER?



Based on 195 Responses

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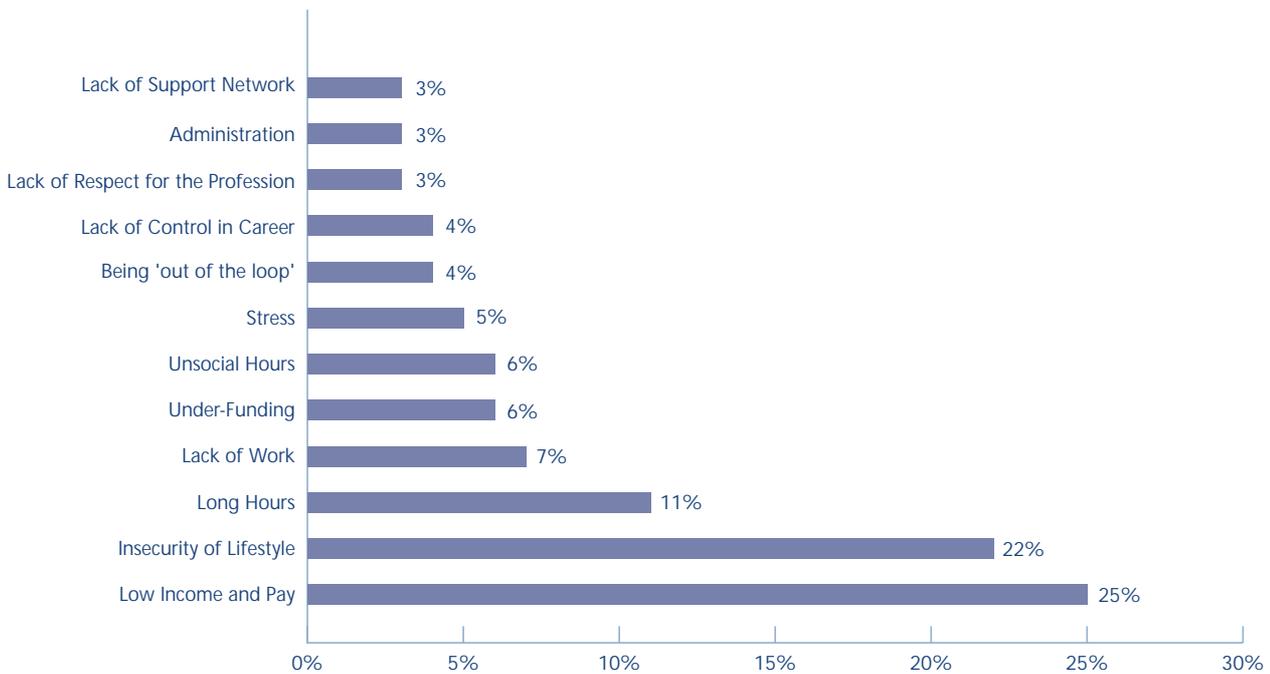
Figure 6 shows that, despite the challenges and difficulties associated with a career in theatre, eight out of ten respondents would choose to work in theatre if starting over, and another one out of ten might do so again. For the majority who would do it again, the recurring view was that theatre is what they love doing, it is a “vocation” and they could not see themselves doing anything else.

Despite these responses, when asked about the stress levels of theatre practitioners:

- 62% thought the stress levels of theatre practitioners were high or very high;
- Only 10% thought stress levels were low or very low.

Practitioners were asked to identify what they felt were the three hardest factors linked to working in theatre. Figure 7 shows the most common responses, and the proportion of respondents who cited them.

FIGURE 7: PERCEIVED HARDEST FACTORS ABOUT WORKING IN THEATRE



Based on 194 Responses

The top two reasons cited in Figure 7 are supported by the survey data.

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## COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

The findings of this survey are generally consistent with the international research findings on the working lives of performing artists. The following are a number of the general findings from the international literature that hold for most categories of performing artist (including theatre practitioners):

- Performing artists tend to have higher levels of formal education than the population as a whole, with higher proportions, for example, educated to degree level;
- Artists tend to have a different pattern of employment status compared to workers as a whole, with an estimated 30% of European cultural workers self-employed. This generates issues around taxation and benefits for self-employed people, with benefits often being lower than for people classified as employees (perhaps on the assumption that self-employed people tend to be better off than employees, an assumption that does not hold for artists);
- A high proportion of artists have second (and even third) jobs, e.g. 56% of Australian artists have two jobs as do 64% of American actors. Alper and Wassall (2000) found that performing artists rank among the highest of all workers who engage in “moonlighting” of multiple job holding. Research by Throsby (1996) showed that artists tend to do non-artistic work to reach a certain minimum income, after which they switch their time to creative or other arts-related work;
- The short period for which many performances run, and the freelance status of theatre practitioners, make periods of unemployment a feature of most theatre workers’ lives. A 2004 US study showed a rate of unemployment for actors at a given time to be 35%, compared to 6% for the wider workforce. Studies show a much higher proportion of performing artists experience some period of unemployment in an average year;
- Artists earn less than other workers with equivalent qualifications, e.g. at an estimated level of 68% of equivalent professionals in Australia (including non-arts income). An exception is Finland, where many actors are employed full-time by the state, and actors do earn equivalent incomes to similarly qualified other workers, although they tend to work more hours for this income.

Innovative measures have been taken in a number of countries to try to support people working in theatre, and other artists. For example, mechanisms for income smoothing, and schemes allowing practitioners to claim unemployment benefit without needing to look for non-theatre work, exist in several EU Member States.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This first comprehensive study of the socio-economic conditions of Irish theatre practitioners therefore indicates the following:

- Theatre practitioners are well educated compared to the wider labour force;
- They are less likely than the wider population to own their own home and more likely to rent;
- Their work pattern is variable and uncertain. Practitioners must manage different jobs, and different types of jobs, as well as periods of unemployment, in a typical year;
- Income levels are low relative to other equivalent professional occupations;
- Theatre practitioners are less likely to take a holiday as compared to the population as a whole;
- There is a lower level of pension provision in this cohort of workers than in the wider labour force, and practitioners can encounter difficulties getting mortgages and car insurance;
- A minority of practitioners encounters difficulties in interacting with the social welfare and taxation systems. These difficulties appear to arise, at least in part, from a lack of appreciation by these systems of the atypical work patterns of theatre practitioners;

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- Despite these issues and socio-economic characteristics, most practitioners would not choose to work at another career, due to a sense of “vocation” about their work in theatre.

The survey demonstrates that, while Irish theatre is subsidised through public funding, the sector is also subsidised by its practitioners, for example, through:

- The levels of unpaid work in the sector;
- The fact that many practitioners work in other jobs to continue in theatre, with management of such a portfolio of jobs likely to impact both on their personal incomes and on the levels of pressure under which they work and live;
- Evidence of support by spouses and other family members, and the proportion of practitioners who say such support is critical to their remaining in theatre;
- A lack of pension provision, which means that the subsidisation of theatre by the practitioners can be argued to continue even after they stop working directly in theatre, i.e. they are sacrificing future income in order to continue working in theatre today.

The evidence of an ongoing subsidy to Irish theatre by Irish theatre practitioners confirms the belief of practitioners that such a subsidy exists, as expressed previously in a 1995 study on Irish theatre by Clancy et al.

A 1966 study by two US economists, Baumol and Bowen, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*, is considered the pioneering study on the socio-economic circumstances of artists. This study drew the following conclusion (using the male pronoun to refer to all artists):

“In many ways, the working conditions of the performer fall below what might be considered reasonable standards. His exhausting tours, high professional expenses, frequent unemployment with its accompanying uncertainty, the rarity of paid vacations and the frequent lack of provision for retirement, all add up to what most of us would consider a nightmare world were we suddenly plunged into it ... Most performing artists are unlikely to starve, but society has not been overly generous in the compensation it has provided the artist in exchange for his contribution to the living arts. We have relied heavily on the willingness of the performer to perform, no matter what it costs him...” .

Commenting on the Baumol and Bowen study in 1996, the Australian cultural economist, David Throsby remarked:

“Looking at the economic circumstances of the performing artist thirty years after Baumol and Bowen may prompt the observation: *plus ca change*. The relative incomes of artists may not have deteriorated markedly in the intervening period, but they have hardly improved either, and remain chronically low in comparison with other similar occupations” .

Based on the findings of this 2005 study on the socio-economic conditions of Irish theatre practitioners, the observation of *plus ca change* in relation to the conclusion of Baumol and Bowen continues to be valid.

