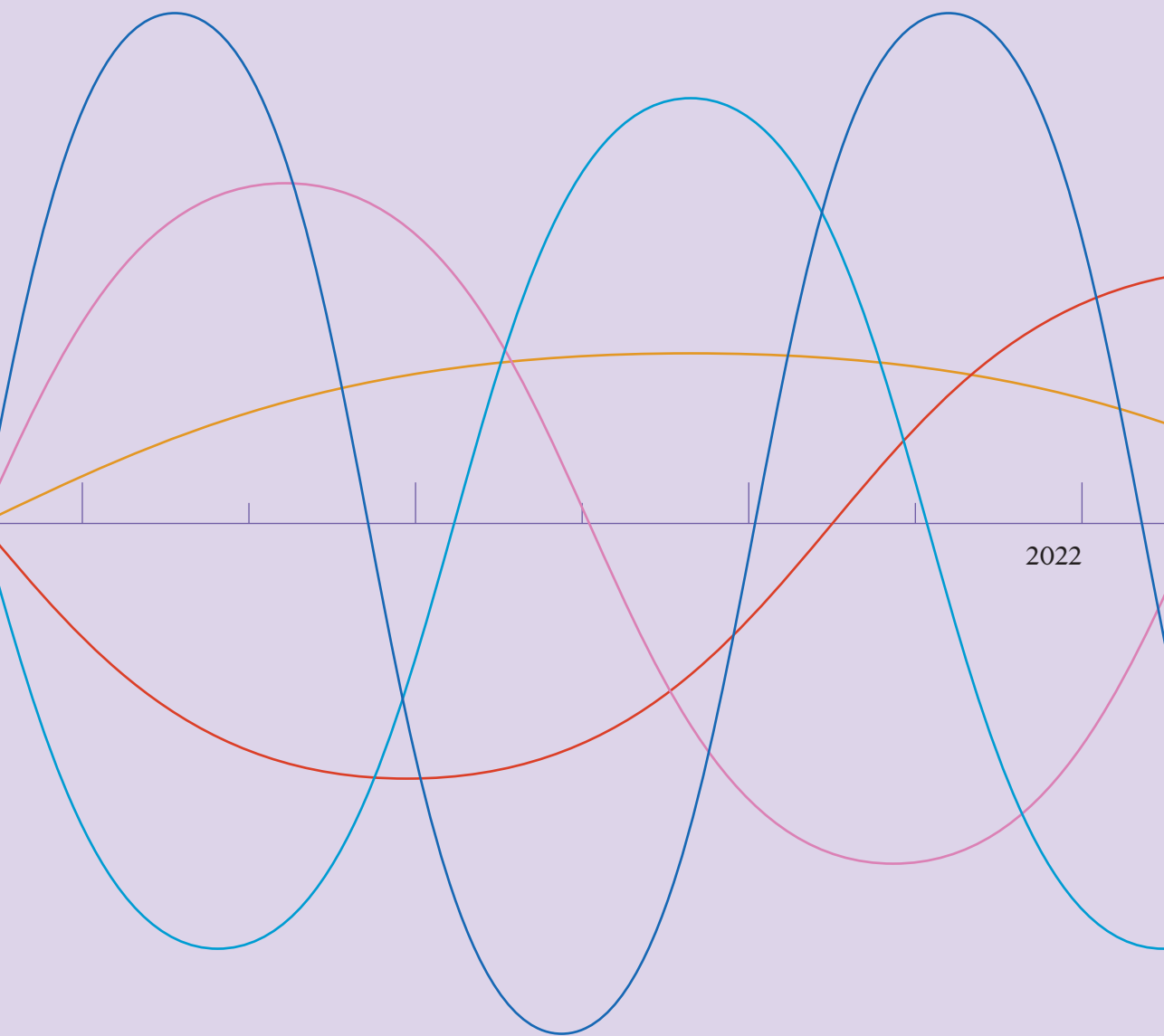
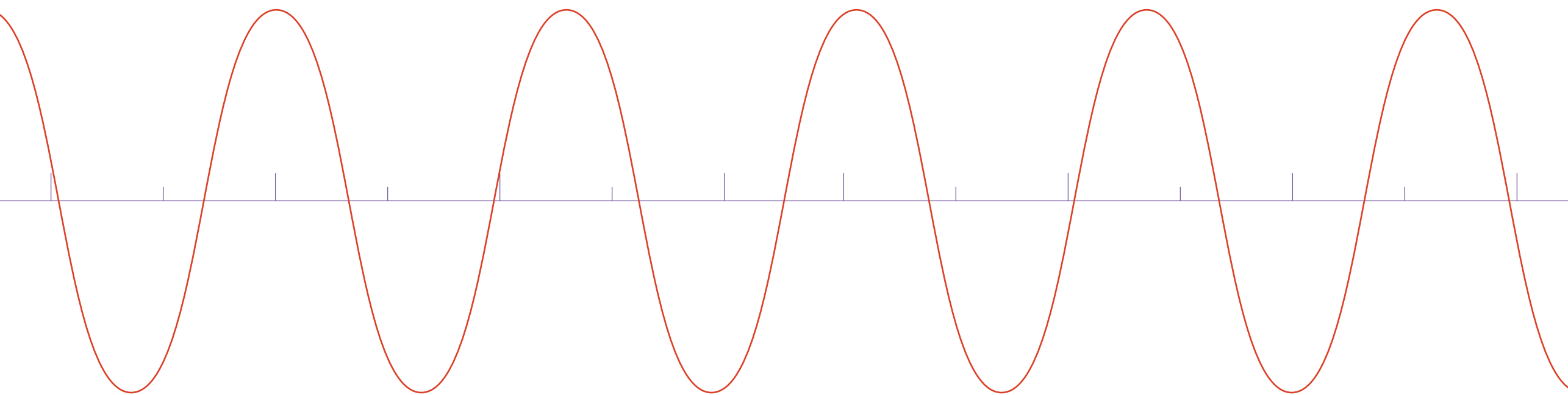


# Critical Voices

## *Guthanna Criticiúla*



Kevin Rafter



Money doesn't solve every problem but it helps

In *The Alternative*, by Michael Patrick and Oisín Kearney, audiences are transferred to a parallel universe. The War of Independence and Civil War never happened. Ireland is still part of the United Kingdom, and the play opens with the national anthem – ‘God Save the Queen’ as Gaeilge.

The backdrop is a referendum campaign to decide the future constitutional status of the island of Ireland. In a television studio, the Irish-born Prime Minister of Great Britain and Ireland is preparing to make the case for remaining in the Union, in a live debate with the opposition leader who favours independence. The clever twist on real-life events raised smiles for audiences when *The Alternative* premiered at the Pavillion Theatre in 2019 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival.

The fall-out from the UK's Brexit referendum was playing out in real-time as the Fishamble Theatre Company production made its way to different regional arts venues. Negotiations between the European Union and the British government were underway on a withdrawal deal, a possible exit date and what was then described as the ‘backstop plan’ to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. A week after *The Alternative* closed its tour – appropriately, at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast – a new protocol was agreed. It was optimistically hoped at the time that the protocol would resolve the Brexit ‘border impasse’.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BBC News, *Brexit: What is in Boris Johnson's new deal with the EU?*, 21 October 2019. See: [www.bbc.com/news/uk-50083026](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-50083026)

<sup>2</sup> ‘A robust grace’ *Irish Arts Review* (Winter 2004), 72–9

<sup>3</sup> ‘Move to advance nation in cultural space’ *Irish Independent*, 26 Jan. 1952

<sup>4</sup> Correspondence between Costello and Sweetman, 1956, TAOIS/S 15225C. NAI

<sup>5</sup> Sebastian Barry, *Hinterland* (Royal National Theatre/Abbey Theatre), 2002

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Dilys-Slaby, Interview with Michael D. Higgins, Minister of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht between 1993 and 1997, *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, 2/4 2004, 211–20

As the referendum debate commences in *The Alternative*, the television moderator announces, 'Voting is now only one day away, in the most important decision Ireland has ever been asked to make.' The play's political leaders argue their respective positions in language very familiar to the UK's real-life Brexit campaign in 2016: 'I ask you not to forget that Britishness is in our history. It's in the stories of our heroes. It's in our blood. That's why we should vote Remain,' the Prime Minister declares. In pressing the Leave proposition, her opponent asserts, 'We can take back control over our laws, our taxes, our borders, and security.'

Work like *The Alternative* is very much in tune with the ambition in *Making Great Art Work*, the Arts Council's strategic plan covering the years 2016 to 2025. Strategic plans can be seen as stuffy and bureaucratic documents, but they have the advantage of offering a guide to travel – where we want to get to; what type of sector we want. The current plan with its emphasis on the role of the artist and public engagement with the arts is even more important when considered alongside policies such as *Pay the Artist*, *Equality Human Rights and Diversity* and *Spatial* (people, places and spaces).

Since my appointment as Chair of the Arts Council in June 2019 I have seen, time and time again, how artists, arts workers and arts organisations deliver on the sentiment in the opening two sentences in *Making Great Art Work*:

The work of artists inspires and reflects the rhythm of the everyday as well as momentous events in public life. The arts shape and challenge us, give us pleasure, help us to know who we are and where we are going: their distinctive, creative power is an essential feature of our consciousness and conversation.

Staying with theatre – and to reference another Fishamble play, *Duck Duck Goose* by Caitriona Daly – the phrase 'the rhythm of the everyday as well as momentous events in public life' is once more made real. The play is about the fall-out from a sexual assault. Jane Scully, a woman in her mid-twenties who works for a financial services firm, confronts one of the men who circulated a surreptitiously-taken graphic photograph of her. When he denies any knowledge, Jane replies, 'Don't you think we don't know? About your WhatsApp group? That we're stupid? All your little pictures. They get screenshotted you know.'

In a related vein, another play from the 2021 Dublin Theatre Festival comes to mind. Phillip McMahon's *Once Before I Go* at the Gate Theatre brought to stage the hidden realities of being gay in contemporary Ireland. Set against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, Bernard, who is dying from the virus, asks his partner: 'Promise me you won't look at me dead. Promise me you'll only remember me as I was tonight. Tripping through Paris, half pissed, looking fabulous.' On the night I saw *Once Before I Go* there were many tears shed in the Gate Theatre. Ireland would be less of a nation, a country, a place – indeed even less of an idea – without these wonderful works of art.

Yet, art – whether created quickly or over many years – does not come without a cost. Artists have to live. The reality of being an artist is a difficult and precarious life. In the late 1960s, the painter Michael Kane was so 'out of pocket' at one stage that he approached Mervyn Wall, Secretary to the Arts Council, at the organisation's offices on Merrion Square. Wall was positioned in a small office at the front of the building, and was tasked with ensuring that unannounced visitors did not disturb the then director, Fr. Donal O'Sullivan. But Kane was not to be stymied. 'Before [Wall] could do anything I had opened the folding doors, gone in and suggested that they might buy some paintings,' the artist later recalled. O'Sullivan explained that the Council could not under its rules give to an individual and that

purchases had to be for a group. 'I am a group,' Kane interjected, 'I've a wife and two kids.'<sup>2</sup>

For long periods after independence in 1922 the Irish State neglected the arts and artists. The sector, and the creators of art, however, ploughed on. For the last seventy years the Arts Council has been fighting the corner for the arts in Ireland – more often than not in the face of great resistance to spending public money on the arts.

Established under legislation in 1951, the first full meeting of the new Arts Council was held on 25 January 1952. In attendance were both Éamon de Valera, the then Taoiseach, and his predecessor John A. Costello, who had brought the arts legislation through the Oireachtas the previous year.<sup>3</sup> De Valera had little to say of importance, except for assuring the new Council members that they had the support of all sides in the national parliament in their endeavours. Costello was more expansive, lamenting that the arts had 'suffered almost complete neglect' and that it had not been easy to convince people of the value of art, literature, drama and theatre. 'There could be no nationality or prosperity without art,' Costello asserted.

In my new book, *Artistic and cultural matters will have to wait* – *Taoisigh & the Arts*, I consider the place of the arts in the personal and governmental worlds of the politicians who have held the office of Taoiseach, and also explore how artists have responded to these national leaders. One artist who read an early draft of my book commented that it was shocking how afraid politicians are of art.

In the case of former Taoisigh, this situation was not for the want to interact with the arts. W.T. Cosgrave appointed W.B. Yeats and Oliver St John Gogarty to the Seanad. In his life before government, Éamon de Valera actually acted on the Abbey stage (in an amateur production), as did Seán Lemass. John A. Costello was an exception in having a genuine interest in the arts. But even Costello was unable to face down the obstructionist position of the Department of Finance.

When his Finance Minister rejected arguments in 1956 for what was a modest increase in the Arts Council's annual budget, Costello replied in writing: 'The suggestion that An Chomhairle Ealaíon comes within the category of "non-essential" services is one on which I prefer to make no comment – for the sake of my blood pressure!'<sup>4</sup>

A common strand in how these political leaders (and many of their civil servant officials) approached the arts was in terms of seeing arts funding as a luxury that the country could not afford. Later Taoisigh – Jack Lynch, Liam Cosgrave, Garret FitzGerald and Albert Reynolds – made little impact on government policy on the arts.

Charles Haughey was another exception but, as he does in all aspects of Irish life, his contribution to the arts divides opinion. To some he was an enlightened Renaissance prince, a modern-day Medici; for others he suffered delusions of grandeur, someone who sought to satisfy his own vanity and elevate his status through association with artists. He is still feted in many quarters for the artist income tax exemption scheme and the foundation of Aosdána. Yet, when it actually came to increasing arts funding, Haughey lines up alongside otherholders of the office of Taoiseach in failing to deliver for artists and arts organisations.

In more recent times, artists have started to unpick Haughey's controversial legacy. Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* draws on various aspects of Haughey's career. Johnny Silvester, the main character in *Hinterland*, is a retired politician, elderly, in poor health and subject to on going inquiry into the source of his personal wealth. But there are still flashes of the political leader of old. 'If they want a great national criminal, here I am,' the emboldened Silvester/Haughey proclaims. 'There would have been no modern era, no change, no new world without me... I am the giant of the modern era.'<sup>5</sup>

The stage direction in *Hinterland* makes the arts central to the Silvester/Haughey character. The setting is a private study in a Georgian mansion, outside Dublin: 'many books, and the walls enduring a storm of modern Irish paintings, le Brocqy, O'Malley et cetera.' Throughout the text, the erudite central character references a litany of literary giants – Yeats, Behan, Heaney, Milton, Tennyson and Tennessee Williams. Whether these references are out of appreciation for these artists and their work – or just pure vanity – is for the audience to determine. We see the Haughey character toiling to capture recollections of his father in Northern Ireland in a letter he struggles to write to two elderly aunts. He bitterly observes, 'To think Seamus Heaney turned his Derry childhood into the stuff of a Nobel Prize.'

The arts were elevated to full-cabinet rank in January 1993, with the appointment of Michael D. Higgins as the first senior-level Minister for the Arts and Culture. From then onwards (under the second Albert Reynolds-led government), the Taoiseach-of-the-day no longer had direct responsibility for arts policy. As such, there was far less direct involvement from subsequent Taoisigh. Higgins had a different perspective of the arts to most of his colleagues, irrespective of their party allegiance.<sup>6</sup> The new Minister met resistance from familiar places in the governmental system including from Department of Finance officials.

I won't recount here the sorry story of the State funding of the arts – and the long litany of unsuccessful Arts Council requests for more money. Almost every annual report over the last seventy years references the low level of funding and the severe limitations on the Council's ability to develop the arts. A commitment to double arts funding – and push the Arts Council's annual budget well-over €100 million for the first time – was made in 2019. But it took the Covid-19 crisis for the importance of the arts to be recognised and, finally, acknowledged in terms of funding support.

In my Introduction to the Council's annual report for 2021, I wrote:

I said on budget day that, 'Money doesn't solve every problem', but this was an important endorsement of the value of artists and the challenges they face. Having €130m as the minimum annual budget figure for the Arts Council beyond 2021 will make a huge impact on so many areas of artistic activity and public engagement.

With annual funding of €130 million in 2022 (having maintained the 2021 level), the Arts Council is in a better place today than at any time in its seventy year history to develop the arts. We are all the better for this outcome.

The case for increased funding was hugely helped by the work of artists during the Covid-19 crisis. The arts was the glorious light in the darkest days of the pandemic. But there is still need to challenge the long-standing and influential viewpoint that State support for the arts is money lost to the public purse. As importantly, there is a need to recognise the importance of a strong, independent influencing voice for the arts. There is huge merit in an independent development agency where funding decisions are taken at arm's length from both the political and governmental systems based on a strategic plan for the sector and avoiding ad hoc-ery and individual whims. Like the Leave and Remain leaders in *The Alternative*, there is a need to continue to seek public and political support for these positions.

