

A Short essay

In response to the four Live and Digital sessions of the Talking Festivals series.

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Talking Festivals Series: Some Observations

Arts festivals are very open entities, continuously in flux, always outward-looking, and strongly connected into wider networks and contexts. Festival practitioners are comfortable with change. They privilege experimentation, seek out new ideas, challenge audiences and artists, and rarely stand still. However, the changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic have been unanticipated and unprecedented, and have disrupted the sector very considerably. In this context, the Arts Council's recent Talking Festival series was a very valuable intervention. This is a sector overwhelmingly populated by small organisations and lacking an over-arching representative organization. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the Arts Council's simple intervention created an invaluable piece of infrastructure that created a sense of cohesion and communicated to individual festivals the important message that they were not alone. Some larger festivals are well equipped to reach out unilaterally to partners and colleagues in Ireland and overseas, and of course there is a lot of informal networking in the sector, but the more formal, facilitated networking created by this intervention helped to share knowledge and advice, offer assurances, build solidarity and support the sector as it negotiated the crisis.

The widespread ingenuity characteristic of arts festivals has been very apparent recently in the creative flexibility and resilience they have shown in weathering the crisis while staying true to their core objectives. The Talking Festival series revealed the diversity of creative responses devised. During the months of lockdown, going digital was an obvious option, but it wasn't a possibility for everyone. Festivals are being differentially affected by the pandemic. Timing is just one issue. Some festivals had finished by the time the pandemic reached Ireland. Others were scheduled to happen just as the crisis was emerging and so had little time to devise alternative modes of delivery. The remainder had at least some opportunity to observe, learn and prepare to create new ways of being festive this year. Size and scale are other issues. The prospect of going digital poses impossible demands on some small amateur festivals. Cost is a major deterrent as are technological capabilities. Artists'

needs must be respected and audience demographics acknowledged, as festivals decide how to move forward. In going digital, festivals face both a steep learning curve and discover new opportunities. Practitioners spoke of reaching new audiences, deepening audience engagement, becoming more artist-led, devising new possibilities for the 'life beyond' live performance, upskilling in a variety of guises, and generating new energies. These digitally inspired benefits will undoubtedly change creative and work practices into the future, showing that the disruptive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has positive dimensions. However, equally, practitioners aired and shared their concerns about embracing digital approaches. Most notable here was the central problematic of how to charge for cultural consumption so as to honour the fundamental principle of always paying the artist. Audience reach was another problematic, with different experiences being reported in respect of festivals reaching out to different audience cohorts. So too was the importance of maintaining freshness, distinctiveness and place rootedness in a context of digital fatigue and the potential serial homogenization of cultural forms in the digital arena.

The series heard festival practitioners share an impressively diverse array of highly creative responses to making festivals this year. All of these require organizations to adapt their work practices, find new ways of negotiating with stakeholders and continue connecting with their audiences. Meanwhile, the immediate future is fraught with fears and concerns about the viability of existing business models, as festivals begin to resume their physical presence in an era of social distancing.

Notwithstanding successful cultural experimentation in the digital arena, the Talking Festival series attested to the core sociability that lies at the heart of festivals. Repeatedly, festival practitioners noted the intrinsic power of festivals to physically bring people together, create shared experiences and create the irreplaceable magic encapsulated in live performances. While several festival iterations in 2020 successfully incorporated physical elements into their programme to maintain a tangible presence, many villages, towns and cities across Ireland sorely missed the irreplaceable, unpredictable and ever changing vitality that festivals 'in situ' engender for artists, performers, audiences, communities, residents, visitors and places alike.

Sometimes, a somewhat reductionist view of arts festivals can prevail, and admittedly, the heterogeneity, value and richness of Ireland's arts festivals can be difficult to grasp. One wonders whether there is widespread cognizance and full appreciation of the creative, inventive, imaginative and resourceful practices and practitioners that characterise the sector. All of these traits were revealed through the Talking Festival series. Imagine if a way could be found to reveal the sector more widely so as to profile its ingenuity and foster a greater appreciation of its contribution to so many aspects of Irish culture and society? One might hope that the very absence of physical festivity this year might engender greater visibility for arts festivals. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Could it yield for this most resourceful, creative and resilient of sectors more respect, more resourcing, more

cherishing by stakeholders inside and outside of the cultural arena? Maintaining solidarity and building community both within the arts festivals sector, and between arts festivals and other parts of the cultural ecosystem, as fostered so effectively by the Arts Council and practiced so enthusiastically in the Talking Festival series, will be important in the months and years ahead.

Dr Bernadette Quinn, TU Dublin, August 2020.