

Talking Festivals Curated Conversations, Session 1

Making festivals for complex geographies

Friday 15th May 2020

2-3.30pm (PILOT)

This session is for festivals operating across different geographies, communities and in some cases over extended timescales often resulting in the creation of smaller bespoke projects, touring of festival works to rural communities and the coordination of local, regional and national partnerships.

Does the structure of these programmes provide opportunities to festivals in the face of such public gathering restrictions? Is the touring festival or national festival model a potential panacea for festivals reimagining their live experiences for smaller audiences?

In attendance

Organisation	Contributor	Arts Practice/Artform area
First Fortnight Festival	David Keegan and Edel Doran	Arts Participation
Earagail Arts Festival	Paul Brown	Multi-disciplinary arts
Baboró	Aislinn Ó hEocha	Young People, Children and Education
Fit Up There Festival	Geoff Gould	Theatre
Age and Opportunity (Bealtaine Festival)	Tara Byrne	Arts Participation
Tipperary Dance	Jazmin Chiodi and Alexandre Iseli	Dance

Platform		
For the Arts Council	Dr David Teevan Karl Wallace Monica Corcoran Seona Ni Bhriain Rachel West	Moderator Head of Festivals Strategic Development Department Head of YPCE Head of Theatre

Minutes

David Teevan welcomed all participants to the session, the first in a series of digital discussions. These discussions stemmed from the findings of the Change Makers Festivals' Conference 2020, including the need for a place for connection for festivals (who often feel isolated) in conjunction with an absence of a space for festivals to discuss the problems they are dealing with in the face of the COVID '19 crisis. David explained that these sessions helped the Arts Council be aware of the current issues that festivals are facing as well as their concerns for the future.

Karl Wallace reiterated the importance of these sessions with regard to discussing challenges, problems and gathering intelligence. He explained that these sessions are not to be confused with larger, sector-wide conversations which will be conducted by Olwen Dawe. Following the introduction, each festival representative was given the opportunity to speak about their concerns.

Festivals introductions

Tara Byrne - Bealtaine Festival

What is the nature of a festival and what can an online festival be? The Bealtaine Festival presents an arts festival for a predominantly older audience, an audience who can often feel isolated. She went on to question what will the confidence levels of audiences be when restrictions are finally lifted. Will everything be online? Will this allow the festival to reach new audiences? How will the festivals be evaluated, both by themselves and by the Arts Council? She expressed frustration with not being able to plan and having to postpone any definitive decisions until absolutely necessary. For Tara, all of these concerns provoked the question of is all of these new elements ultimately worth the end product?

Jazmin Chiodi and Alexandre Iseli - Tipperary Dance Platform

Jazmin echoed Tara's sentiments and shared similar concerns. The Tipperary Dance Project takes place in October so Jazmin began with hope that the festival could still take place, this hope has now gone. This has provoked Jazmin to begin thinking about what is possible and what can be easily cancelled if necessary. The Tipperary Dance Project entered into a discussion with their partner venues to see how much they can adapt and go along with updated programmes. This, so far, has proved successful with venues responding positively as they are facing a lot of the same programming issues. The Tipperary Dance Project is now rethinking formats and models. They are looking at how their programme can be translated to an online platform and how each element of the festival can be represented. They feel it is their responsibility to still give artists the opportunity to make work.

Aislinn O 'hEocha - Baboró International Arts Festival for Children

Aislinn shared a lot of the same issues that were expressed by other participants. Aislinn highlighted that next year's Baboró festival would have been their 25th anniversary. Last year they had an audience of over 23,000. For this year's festival, they presumed that restrictions would be lifted and they would be presenting a celebratory event, however they realise this will not be the case. They will be making more definitive decisions in June. The festival does significant work with schools and community groups and is heavily reliant on schools for their audience. As such, they will be significantly affected by the restrictions relating to schools. Aislinn is considering the possibilities of other forms of socially-distant engagements including, bringing artists to schools, creating street arts events, etc. She also expressed significant concern regarding the funding they received from local authorities and asked if the Arts Council is in touch with local authorities regarding this?

David Keegan - First Fortnight

David Keegan followed by remarking that First Fortnight was one of the lucky festivals as it took place in January, so in many ways it is business as usual for them at the moment. However, a lot of their other outreach and fundraising duties have been shut down including their creative therapy programme which has now been changed into checking in with clients via the phone. They are projecting income and fundraising losses of €20,000 minimum. David remarked that the amount of anxiety and stress during the COVID '19 crisis would be significantly high; as a result he thought that First Fortnight 2021 would be the most important iteration of the festival to date. He also said that because so many arts spaces are shut down at the moment, a lot of

spaces are booking up fast for 2021. He expressed that festivals were central to kick starting local economies and also providing safe harbors' for communities to reengage again.

Paul Brown - Earagail Arts Festival

Paul expressed similar concerns and levels of grief as the previous speakers. However, he also remarked that many opportunities come with challenges. He questioned how the festival can best connect with audiences, how they can still be important and relevant for the community and how they can engage with new audiences?

Geoff Gould - Blood in the Alley

Geoff began by first apologising that he could not attend the Change Makers Festivals Conference. He then went on to explain that one of his festivals has already taken place and he is currently planning his second. The summer festival is primarily concerned with bringing performance to island communities in the west of Ireland. Geoff expressed the anxieties of these communities who do not want an influx of people from mainland Ireland. Geoff also remarked that he had no interest in bringing the festival online, partly because the internet service on these islands is poor. He is intent on some iteration of the festival still going ahead regardless and he is basing a lot of his decisions on the actions of the church and when masses begin again. He remarked that he is aware that he will not be able to get his audience to smaller venues, but is confident that he can get them to larger ones. However, the audience for the festival is an older one and ticket sales make up 60% of the festivals income. One of his main concerns is regarding insurance.

Edel Doran - First Fortnight

At this point Edel wanted to raise a number of concerns/questions. Firstly, she asked if the Arts Council could survey audiences in order to identify their attitudes and confidence in returning to arts centres. Secondly, she pointed out that not all arts audiences have online access and not all festivals have the technical intelligence to transfer their programme to an online platform. Edel wondered if the Arts Council can assist with guidance on these technical issues. Finally Edel wondered if the Arts Council could confirm what funding streams are confirmed to be going ahead and what streams are still up for discussion.

David Keegan - First Fortnight

David added to this by questioning what supports will be available in relation to mental health which will be a significant issue during this crisis. This was responded to by Monica Corcoran who remarked that the Arts Council was giving a lot of consideration towards this issue.

Jazmin Chiodi and Alexandre Iseli - Tipperary Dance Platform

Although Jazmin empathised with and understood the concerns, she was eager to bring the discussion back to the festival realm. At this point both Jazmin and Alexandre explained some of their ideas and concepts for this year's iteration of the Tipperary Dance Platform. They are currently exploring a model in between all online and physical gathering events which would be received in different hotspots. This, they hope, will create a sense of gathering and interaction whilst also being accessible via online broadcast reaching new audiences and audiences who may not be able to travel. This brings with it technical concerns, provoking the team to consult with digital experts regarding digital rights and copyright. Both also expressed how their financial concerns were not as paramount as for other festivals as the Tipperary Dance Project do not rent their venues and instead run each event in partnership with their partner venues. This, they proposed, could be a model which would ease economical pressure for festivals in the future.

Discussion:

- Following this, Karl Wallace emphasised the importance for festivals to speak to one another regarding their online initiatives. Karl offered specific examples of festivals that were producing work online including the Kerry Festival who are exploring digital platforms and licensing issues. Karl also remarked that digital is not necessarily the answer, and may be more suitable for some festivals rather than others. There needs to be a better understanding amongst the Arts Council with regard to how much work is going into the deconstruction and reconstruction of festival programmes.
- Paul Brown responded to this by saying that almost 50% extra hours per week were going into the reflection and deliberation needed for the reconstruction of the festival programme. He remarked that a whole extra set of challenges arose with regard to working in the digital realm including what are programming exclusivities, what will people pay to attend and what is the legacy of digital festivals? Paul also remarked that although these are interesting questions, a digital festival will never fully replace an experiential one.

- Tara Byrne was asked to respond to this as Bealtaine is currently presenting online events in this year's programme. Tara remarked that the numbers of attendees/viewers for these events are good, however it is difficult to know if people are really engaging in the work. It is easy to reach these attendees easily if they book for an event, but not if they are just viewing it online. Tara followed this up by saying that a survey is planned for the end of the month to gather this information. She also remarked the difficulties that exist with live performers who are used to performing to an audience, but now have to perform to a camera. This, she feels, is a very difficult way of performing and a lot of the dynamism is gone.
- Aislinn built on this by saying that the online events of the Cuirt festival had a donation option for attendees which garnered ⅓ of what the festival would usually gain in ticket sales. Regarding the Baboró International Arts Festival for Children, Aislinn remarked that she was determined to have some iteration of the festival take place. She said that the arts events associated with this festival are crucial for the social needs of children. Digital events do not work in the same way and a shared experience is lost. She emphasised that she was looking to street and spectacle genres for inspiration for this year's programme. Aislinn also expressed some concern that there may not be an advocacy space for children's arts and was disappointed to see that there was no representative for children's arts on the Arts Council advisory forum.

Conclusion:

The session was concluded with David Teevan and Karl Wallace both reiterating the importance of the conversation which helps the Arts Council understand the challenges festivals are facing and what they are doing to overcome these. All participants were thanked for attending and reminded of the larger digital session titled 'Live & Digital' which will take place in June.

End.

The Zoom chat function was not recorded for this session