

## Talking Festivals Curated Conversations, Session 4

### *Community Connections*

Friday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020

2-3.30pm

This session will bring together a range of festivals from around the country that are created by the local community for the local community. These festivals are key milestones in their local cultural and social calendar and are recognised as being of significant importance to the identity of these communities. The festivals will be invited to share the challenges they have faced in cancelling and or re-imagining alternative programmes in their localities. How can a local festival galvanize its community facing into such public space restrictions?

### **In attendance**

Organisation	Contributor	Arts Practice/Artform area
Clifden Community Arts Festival	Des Lally and Brendan Flynn	MDA
Féile na Bealtaine	Peadar O Fionnain	MDA
Shorelines Arts Festival	Noelle Lynskey	MDA
Féile Roise Rua	Brian Glynn	Traditional Arts
Traidphicnic	Bridget Barker and Liam Collins	Traditional Arts
Hearsay International Audio Arts Festival	Diarmuid McIntyre and Paula Carroll	Audio Arts
The Arts Council	Karl Wallace	Festivals
	Catherine Boothman	Traditional Arts Team
	Paul Flynn	Traditional Arts Team

## **Minutes**

David Teevan (DT) introduced the fourth of the digital discussions. He explained how these sessions arose as an extension of the Change Makers Festivals' Conference. The sessions also were created in response to festival makers who had approached the Arts Council expressing their need for a dedicated space for festival discussions as there was no resource organisation providing this for the sector. DT explained that each session was themed and for this iteration the theme was community connection featuring festivals that had a significant and special relationship with their community. DT remarked that the COVID crisis has created a culture of sharing which is important to the Arts Council in terms of hearing concerns from the sector, identifying possible areas of support as well as general information gathering.

Karl Wallace (KW) added to the introduction by thanking participants for attending and echoing David's remarks regarding the importance of these sessions for the Arts Council. He also reminded participants that larger digital discussions will take place at the end of June which will be informed by these smaller sessions. He also explained that these sessions are not to be confused with the larger corporate exercises which will be conducted over the coming months.

## **Festivals introductions**

### **Peadar Ó Fionnáin (POF) - Féile na Bealtaine**

Féile na Bealtaine is a community-based bilingual festival which takes place annually in Dingle, Co. Kerry. POF remarked that in mid-March, the COVID health crisis was evolving day by day. It was during this time the festivals programme would usually be launched; however there was a very quick realisation that this was not going to happen. No agonising took place over whether or not to continue with the festival as there was a sense that something larger was happening to the country which was non-negotiable. POF remarked that his first concern was that of the ecosystem of arts practitioners and their meager income. He added that there were a large number of artists that were relying on the festival financially. POF thanked the Arts Council for honoring their funding as this was not what they experienced with their other funders. Because of this, the funding that they did receive was dispersed as best they could amongst their programmed artists, however they did not pay tech/production staff. These payments not only provided financial support to artists, but also helped maintain relationships between artist and festival which hopefully will be capitalised on next year. POF added that he was not really interested in bringing the programme online as a festival is a real-life experience which needs to happen on the street. He stated that they played with online ideas but didn't feel the demand from their audience, which heavily influences their programming decisions. POF also added that smaller, symbolic break-out events did take place, however these were not very well organised.

### **Bridge Barker (BB) and Liam Collins (LC) - Traidphicnic**

Traidphicnic is a community-based arts festival that takes place in An Spidéal, Galway which was due to take place from the 3rd to the 5th of July. BB remarked that the festival team went through an initial period of shock earlier in the year and struggled to see how the festival could go ahead. She remarked that after contacting a number of artists due to perform, she discovered that there was still a desire to do something. As such they programmed some 15 minute, online performances which was all programmed remotely. She added that these artists will be asked to return to the festival next year. The three local gigs that were part of their programme are now being filmed next weekend as the 20km distance is now allowed. She expressed the need for expertise in the audio/film area. The festival is creating a hyper-lapse tour along the coast which will feature a number of performers who are all being paid. The festival is also to reach communities that can't be online. To do this, they are partnering with a local bus company who are providing an open top bus that will transport performers to specific sections of the community. LC added to this by stating that in addition to missing out on the festival dates, the team were also missing out on the dates leading up to the festival which are used for fundraising purposes. DT remarked that fundraising outside of festival time has certainly been impacted.

### **Noelle Lynskey (NL) - The Shorelines Festival**

The Shorelines Arts Festival takes place annually in Portumna, Co. Galway. A decision was made two weeks ago to cancel the festival which was due to take place from the 17th - 20th September. NL remarked that, similarly to Peadar, she was not enthusiastic about creating online events. She emphasised this further by remarking that even the festivals committee had a very negative response to having online meetings. NL remarked that the usual venues for the festival are quite small and would only be able to hold 20-25 audience members. This is not an option with regard to health and safety. They also had a big Galway 2020 event (3 shows from the UK) coming to them which was also cancelled. NL expressed that the local community were very disappointed because of the cancellation. She stated that they are hoping to mark the weekend with some visual arts projects in the town. They have set up an art trail over the years of the festival and are working on having a similar event this year in a safe manner. NL expressed that, in contrast to Féile na Bealtaine, she felt a responsibility to the tech/production staff of the festival who have been with them over a number of years. She also expressed a loyalty to the artists and hoped to include the cancelled artists in next year's iteration of the festival.

### **Des Lally (DL) and Brendan Flynn (BF) - Clifden Arts Festival.**

DL expressed a sense of positivity and hope for this year's iteration of the Clifden Arts Festival as it is due to take place in September where hopefully there will be fewer restrictions. He had a number of issues he wanted to raise during this session. Firstly, DL remarked that their decision-making with regard to the festival was heavily influenced by gaging the responses and feelings of the local community. He remarked that they were interested in finding out if the community would feel safe with the festival going ahead and added that after going on local radio regarding this, a positive response was received. Similarly, he questioned as to whether there would be the same availability of volunteers who may not feel safe participating. He highlighted that there would be a huge duty of care for those volunteers. He remarked that the duration and scope of the festival would be less fixed and availability of venues would be significantly more limited. DL remarked that the festival was considering hiring a COVID '19 Officer which would be a pivotal and very important figure in their team. DT remarked that this was mandatory in the Theatre Forum guidelines for arts centres, but this was the first time a festival spoke about it. DL also questioned what the situation would be like with schools as the festival collaborates with schools regularly. In regard to finances, DL states that their sponsorship from local businesses was decimated and questioned if their insurance fees would be increased. He concluded by stating that the festival is currently planning some mobile, pop-up events which will travel to specific sections of the community for socially distant performances. With this in mind, DL remarked that the recording of such events would be significantly important for their archive.

### **Brian Glynn (BG) - Féile Róise Rua**

Féile Róise Rua is a traditional music festival and takes place annually on Aranmore Island each May. BG remarked that the festival takes place in an isolated community which would have felt at risk to COVID '19. As a result, the island shut down a lot earlier than other parts of the country resulting in the cancellation of the festival. He thanked the Arts Council for honoring their funding which allowed them to pay all the artists involved. BG remarked that they were also able to pay venues which he stated were possibly more important as their venues are community run centres and local businesses which are now at risk. He also said that the festival always operates with the possibility of cancellation as they are heavily dependent on weather which dictates whether or not the boats will be running. After restrictions in terms of fishing, the island is now heavily reliant on tourism which is non-existent now. As such, BG expressed some uncertainty in terms of the future of local businesses and the future of the festival as a result. He remarked that they have explored online performances and have received a positive response from audiences to them. He concluded by stating that the festival created a call-out to the local community for recordings of singing and music. These recordings were used to

advertise a GoFundMe campaign which has currently raised over €7,500 for the local community centre.

### **Diarmuid McIntyre (DMI) & Paula Carroll (PC) - HearSay International Audio Arts Festival**

DMI expressed sympathy for festivals that had to cancel their programme during this period. The HearSay International Audio Arts Festival had originally been scheduled to take place in April this year. However, they had recently turned the festival into a biennale event, meaning the next iteration of the festival is due to take place in April 2021. The festival engages with two specific communities, the south Limerick community and international audio community. The decision to move from an annual festival to a biennale one was in part to dedicate more time to develop relationships with international audiences and artists. Their festival also operates an outreach programme with schools and residencies which has now been cancelled. DMI remarked that their biggest challenge is the level of uncertainty, even when looking into 2021, making planning almost impossible. He remarked that next year, the environment will be very different. 80% of their programmed artists are international ones (coming from places like New Zealand, England, America, etc.) which may be difficult to get into the country next year. In addition, these international artists could create a sense of fear and discomfort amongst the local community. DMI felt that this could force the festival to feature more local and national artists which could be a positive thing. Similarly to the Clifden Arts Centre, DMI expressed concern with regard to generating local sponsorship as the local economy has been significantly affected by COVID '19. He remarked that a number of 2-3 year sponsorship deals have now ceased their sponsorship. NL related to this and expressed difficulty with regard to looking for sponsorship money at this time.

### **Discussion**

DT asked the group about their local communities. He asked if they had noticed a sense of desire for the festivals to go ahead or a sense of fear regarding the possible danger associated with mass gatherings. DMI responded to this by saying that the community's feelings were conflicted, much like those of the festival makers. He remarked that south Limerick withdrew from the outside world, but now there was a sense of desire to reconnect. DMI added that at its core, the community expressed a sense of support for the festival which may be significant in terms of a route to recovery. NL added to this by talking about her experiences working as a pharmacist. She remarked that although the community was still very supportive of the Shorelines Festival, there was still a significant feeling of fear. PC added to this by saying that whilst this period could be seen as an opportunity for reflection, everything is happening in 5/6 week cycles making it difficult to visualise the 2021 edition of the HearSay International Audio Arts Festival. She felt that there was a noticeable appetite to get back out there and engage with events, however this is all dependent on how things develop over the next two months and if

there is a second surge of COVID '19.

BF stated that the negative landscape at the moment emphasised the importance of the arts during this time. He offered support to other attendees, remarking that they shouldn't feel discouraged as there were a similar amount of people enquiring about the Clifden Arts Festival as there were enquiring about Mass - highlighting again the importance of the arts for the community. He referenced similar periods throughout Irish history and what role the arts played in them, stating that the sector could react in a similar manner. BF stated that there was a determination for Clifden to go ahead with some sort of festival, that there was a plan in place and they hoped it would work. He stated that these sessions were incredibly helpful as festival makers can often feel isolated. DL added to this by addressing the festivals that have already cancelled their programme. He stated that their work leading up to their cancellation in terms of relationship building with artists, is still valuable work and should not be seen as wasted. The connections made with artists are equally if not more important than the performances themselves. This work is also extremely significant in terms of archiving. DL commended the Arts Council for broadening their remit and looking at the regional communities the festivals have a significant impact on.

### **POF left the meeting**

Paul Flynn remarked that the comradery and support amongst the festivals present was amazing. He also commended their commitment to supporting artists as many artists do not qualify for the COVID-19 Income Supports Scheme.

DMI remarked that there may be a need for specific funding which would operate outside traditional arts spaces and could be dedicated to bringing art to non-traditional arts audiences. This funding could be focused specifically on accommodation, transport, etc. which could eliminate possible barriers to engagement and create a sense of possibility for audiences who may not see the arts as viable or accessible. DT responded to this by saying that although many festivals were cancelled in real life, they were still operating in a virtual capacity which was still providing opportunities for connecting artists with communities.

KW asked if the group could discuss further how the cancellation of festivals was affecting the local communities and how this has been responded to. DL responded to this by first referring to the Clifden Arts Festivals school programme. He remarked that if the festivals artists are not allowed into schools, they will get around this by spreading their 4 days of engagement over a number of months if possible. He also remarked that the committee is meeting with hoteliers regularly who have been hugely affected. DL remarked that the affect the festival will have on the community is intangible. He added that artists are crying out to perform again and if their festival goes ahead it will have a significantly positive impact on the community. NL responded to this by saying that the local community of the Shorelines Festival was extremely

disappointed. The festival is trying to respond to this by creating safe, outdoor and online initiatives which will be worked on over the next few months, one of which will be their recitation competition. She also remarked the importance of documentation by referring to a previous winner of this competition who died during this period. DMI responded that festivals have dedicated audiences who rely somewhat on the festival for social connection. He remarked that many of the audience members of the Hearsay festival are focusing on reuniting with each other at the 2021 festival. He said that it was important to focus on sustaining and building on these connections outside of the festival. KW responded to these remarks by stating building on these relationships was an important point. He followed this up by stating that the Cork Midsummer Festival had repurposed their long table, dinner event, which is part of their programme, to a portable picnic event which keeps these connections to audience events and local businesses.

### **LC and DMI left the meeting**

BG wanted to point out that a positive by-product of creating an online programme was the opportunity for an open-sourced, unbiased record of the music and art being presented at this time. BB reiterated the importance of this and highlighted that the Traidphnic audience responded very positively to their online initiatives. PF responded to this by saying that the Irish Traditional Music Archive was doing great work with a number of festivals in terms of collating information and documenting this significant period.

Catherine Boothman remarked that there was a lot of amazing content online. The Arts Council was getting a good sense of the challenges and opportunities being faced by artists and festival makers. She remarked that festivals are looking at hybrid models with smaller decentralised events which provide a lot of engagement and learning opportunities. This is providing a lot of technical challenges which is pushing a lot of people to up skill in this area. She also expressed concern with regard to both older audiences, who may not be eager to engage with the arts anymore, and with teenage audiences who are now at a significant loss for activities. PF remarked that the traditional arts scene was an intergenerational community and was significantly aural which may add to older audiences concern. PC commented on this further stating that a lot has changed for young people, however one thing which hasn't changed is their online consumption. She built on this by stating that online work is its own artform and this needs to be focused on.

DT concluded the session by remarking that the idea that online programmes adding to a potential archive was a significant and interesting one. He added that the Arts Council acknowledges and respects the pressure on festival makers especially those who are sustaining a separate non-arts related career. He thanked all for attending and remarked that the discussion and support amongst participants were awe inspiring.

**The public Zoom chat function was not used during this session**

