

## Talking Festivals Curated Conversations, Session 5

### *Venues and Festivals – How to respond to change.*

Friday 12th June 2020

2-3.30pm

Arts Centres and festivals have long enjoyed mutually beneficial partnerships with some venues operating their own festivals as part of their own programme development. In light of the recent published guidelines for the reopening of arts centres ([https://www.theatreforum.ie/assets/uploads/Re-opening-Arts-Centres\\_Doc-v.1.1.pdf](https://www.theatreforum.ie/assets/uploads/Re-opening-Arts-Centres_Doc-v.1.1.pdf)) the landscape for how venues can accommodate both artists and audiences will significantly change. How will festivals respond to social distancing measures in venues, reduced audience capacities and reduced box office? How can festivals reimagine partnerships with their arts centre collaborators in the presenting of arts for the public?

### In attendance

Organisation	Contributor	Arts Practice/Artform area
Birr Arts Centre, (Playwriting Scripts Festival)	Emma Nee Haslam	Venues
Galway Theatre Festival	Sorcha Keane	Theatre
Drogheda Arts Festival/Droichead Arts Centre, Louth	Collette Farrell	Festivals MDA/Venues
Project Arts Centre , Dublin	Cian O'Brien	Venues
Hawkswell Theatre Sligo	Marie O'Byrne	Venues
<u>Uillinn (West Cork Arts Centre)</u>	Ann Davoren, Director	Venues

	Dermot McLaughlin	
For the Arts Council	Karl Wallace Val Balance Rachel West	Head of Festivals Head of Arts Centres Head of Theatre

### Apologies

Claire Power – Co-Head of Visual Arts

Cliona Dukes – Scene and Heard Festival (Smock Alley)

### Minutes

David Teevan introduced the fifth in six digital discussions for small-mid scale festivals. Each session is themed and for this discussion, the theme was the relationship between festivals and arts centres. DT remarked that both festivals and arts centres have a responsibility to artists and audiences to provide spaces for arts engagement. He remarked that a platform for discussion already exists for arts centres via Theatre Forum; however festivals do not have a representative organisation providing such opportunities. He referenced the importance of the Change Makers Festivals’ conference which provided a space for connection for festivals. However, a month after the conference, the COVID health crisis hit Ireland provoking several different responses from festivals. DT expressed that there was still a desire amongst festivals to connect and continue the conversations started at the Change Makers Conference. As such, these digital discussions were initiated.

Karl Wallace thanked all participants for attending especially those who were busy repurposing programmes. He asked each attendee to highlight particular challenges they are facing as they introduced themselves.

## **Festival Introductions**

### **Sorcha Keane - Galway Theatre Festival**

SK is the Festival Director of the Galway Theatre Festival. She highlighted the importance of these discussions remarking that they created a sense of not feeling so isolated. The Galway Theatre Festival is in its 12th year. This year's proposed programme consisted of 20 shows over 9 days in 12 venues. The festival was cancelled just before their programme launch. A number of events went online including their Interaction project which successfully became a fully digital initiative. Their digital events garnered over 7000 views on their website from 35 different countries. SK remarked that the increased accessibility associated with online events was significant. The festival is currently producing some digital profiles of the companies they work with. SK stated that they are now significantly limited in terms of resources, as such they are doing what they can with what they have. In terms of concerns, SK expressed uncertainty in terms of what the festival will look like next year stating that the festival environment will be very different. She expects a rise in non-traditional theatre spaces and alternative ways of making work but expressed concern as to how that will affect insurance policies. SK also expressed concern with the experiences of audiences which may be significantly hampered or lost in this new environment.

### **Marie O'Byrne - Hawk's Well Theatre**

MOB is the Director of the Hawk's Well Theatre which co-host and co-produce several festivals in their programme. She highlighted that these festivals are a mainstay over the summer period. The Hawk's Well closed on the 12th of March and as a result, an online programme was created. MOB remarked that one thing which emerged from the lockdown was a strong community of musicians which began making an online festival. The Hawk's Well supported such initiatives by providing a recording space and technical team. These recordings will eventually consist of larger numbers of performers and production crew as restrictions are lifted. MOB remarked that the venue itself is formulating a COVID response, albeit slowly. She stated that their plan going forward consists of small progressions and testing. She stated that the testing will begin in the foyer of the space and will eventually move into the auditorium. MOB highlighted that testing is a luxury that arts centres have that festivals do not.

### **Collette Farrell - Drogheda Arts Festival / Droichead Arts Centre**

CF is the Co-Chair of the Drogheda Arts Festival and the Director of the Droichead Arts Centre. She remarked that the Drogheda Arts Festival was initially postponed from March to August; however it was only officially cancelled this week. In terms of the centre, there are a lot of collaborations with different festivals and partners. She stated that the festival, which is 13

years old this year, is largely funded by the Arts Council of Ireland and Louth County Council and is run by a voluntary programming team. A significant part of their programme is showcasing international performers which are niche acts that attract wider audiences. Over the years, the festival has begun to use non-traditional arts spaces that are available in Drogheda. CF stated that the festival was a source of funding for the arts centre as the centre was paid for providing a box office. The festival also brings programming options that the centre usually doesn't have. She remarked that after the cancellation, a decision was made not to bring any of the events online. This was largely to do with restrictions with resources and time as two members of the festival team also run venues. CF remarked that the Droichead Arts Centre will be reopening on the 28th of July with a soft opening. This will act as a test for the Drogheda Arts Festival. She remarked that challenges are largely to do with a lack of resources, changes to their insurance policies and how best to plan for 2021. She expressed significant concern as to how to ensure survival of both the Drogheda Arts Festival and the Droichead Arts Centre. DT remarked it was interesting to hear a perspective informed by both a festival and an arts centre. He also stated that the timing of each festival significantly dictates the responses of each festival team highlighting that one general response does not suit all festivals.

#### **Emma Nee Haslam - Birr Theatre & Arts Centre**

ENH is the Venue Manager for the Birr Theatre & Arts Centre. Similarly to the Hawk's Well Theatre, the centre has co-hosted and co-produced a number of different festivals. Most or all of the festivals are run on a voluntary basis which has its challenges. ENH remarked that the *Scripts, Ireland's Playwriting Festival* was due to take place in July last year (it's usual slot), but was moved to November due to maternity leaves. This resulted in a decision to not have the festival for 2020, with the centre deciding to focus on other things during this time. However, when COVID hit, it was decided that *Scripts* was one of the initiatives that they could easily transfer to an online platform, so they decided to produce a live and online festival. The online festival operated in a similar way to the real festival. ENH remarked that they did face significant technical challenges when doing this but collaborated with local producers who had expertise in the area. She remarked that they did not know what sort of audience they would get for this but were surprised to see that they engaged with double the audience that they usually would, similarly to the Galway Theatre Festival. They are currently planning *Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival*, which currently consists of online and real-life events depending on restrictions. Over the next two months, they will be testing out events in the centre which will help with their festival planning.

#### **Ann Davoren - West Cork Arts Centre**

AD is the Director of the West Cork Arts Centre which is based in Skibbereen. She remarked that west Cork would have many festivals that take place mainly from May to September each year.

The centre has linked in with these festivals in various ways over the years, ranging from providing spaces for performances, workshops, etc. to devising events for festivals (usually within the socially engaged, multi-disciplinary areas). AD is on the board of Skibbereen Arts Festival and West Cork Music which runs three festivals in the Bantry area. In terms of the value the festivals give to the arts centre, AD stated that they provide a point of focus and add to the cultural capital of the region. She remarked that the centre records its highest number of visitors during the Skibbereen Arts Festival each year. When the centre closed on the 12th of March, they brought many of their events online which has provoked a significant amount of engagement, not only through online means but also via telephone and post. They are reopening the centre on the 20th of July and plan to continue their online programme as well as slowly coming back to working with small groups. Similarly to other speakers, they will be operating a testing method to see the reaction from audiences. AD also stated that the Skibbereen Arts Festival was currently looking at art in the public domain at the minute, in part in response to the lack of indoor space for pop-up exhibition work.

### **Cian O'Brien - Project Arts Centre**

COB is the Artistic Director of the Project Arts Centre. He remarked that the centre closed on the opening night of *Where we live*, a festival by THISISPOPBABY, which still has staging and equipment in the building at the moment. COB stated that the Project Arts Centre has very significant relationships with a lot of the major Dublin-based arts festivals. The closest relationship they have is with the Fringe Festival as the co-programme and co-produce. These festivals are very important to the centres programme as the feature work that the centre wouldn't ordinarily be able to present themselves, particularly international work. In addition, the festivals are rental income for the centre which sustained the centre during the recession years. The Fringe Festival will be going ahead this year and they are currently looking at alternative, non-traditional performance methods. A challenge is also figuring out how to get the staff back into the building. He remarked that the relationships and collaborative nature of the festivals are extremely valuable. With the festivals that are presented in the autumn (Fringe and Theatre Festival), the programmes consist of almost all new work. This will present a challenge in terms of the technical nature of set-up and how to do this safely but not to impinge on the artistic integrity of the work. COB stated that the restrictions have brought with it the opportunity to think about how they are using their building. Their ground floor space will no longer be open to audiences for the rest of the year and instead will be used as an artist's space.

### **Dermot McLaughlin**

DML previously worked in the Arts Council and now works as a freelance consultant in business planning and strategy development. He was also on the board of the Dublin Dance Festival and during that time he noticed the benefits of a relationship between festival and venue. DML

expressed a need to reconfigure how we think about both the festivals and the venues. He stated that so many festivals rely on voluntary committees which bring with it certain fragility. DML stated that a dominant question that has arisen this year is that of questioning what is the form of a festival going to be like for the next few years. He expressed the social value festival brings to communities and how there is now a pressure for this to change. He stated that the high level of uncertainty in the sector emphasised the importance of the connection between festivals and venues. DML went on to talk about the migration of events online. He understood that there was a pressure to salvage already planned programmes, however questioned the quality of experience felt by not only audiences but performers. He questioned how we might envisage what the audience of a festival will be like in the future, with possibly some physically present and some virtually present. DML proposed that the period from now until 2022 should be seen as a period of transition in which it was important to decipher and identify what we can continue to do and no longer do. He remarked on the frailty of the sector and stated the need to create and present arguments to the government to garner funding and support.

## **Discussion**

DT asked attendees if they also felt that there was 2 ½ years ahead to both contend with restrictions and identify possible routes forward. COB remarked that he thought the crisis was much more immediate and a period of 6 months to address it seemed more realistic. He felt that the crisis was mainly concerned with not only the venues who are struggling but artists whose income has gone. He stated that a period of 2 ½ years would be much more applicable to devising a longer recovery strategy. He concurred with DML that there was a need to figure out a way to present a case to the government on the importance of the arts sector.

DT questioned how centres can help ensure the survival of festivals heading into 2021. SK remarked that the Town Hall Theatre in Galway has been very supportive to the Galway Theatre Festival. She remarked that the festival has been working on a short term plan in conjunction with their venues. This plan is concerned with presenting work in a somewhat physical and somewhat virtual manner. SK remarked that her main concern was the next 8 months and the uncertainty with regard to their funding from Galway City Council. In addition, the festival lost all their sponsors (who were all in the hospitality industry) for 2020. She expressed loyalty to artists and arts workers and highlighted that the festival's priority is to pay them appropriately for their work, however expressed the difficulties of making any long-term plans. SK reiterated the supportiveness of the Town Hall Theatre who has encouraged the festival to use the building in whatever way possible. She proposed that this sort of attitude from arts centres and venues is very important as it creates a sense of hope for the festival and emphasises the mutually beneficial relationship that they have.

Val Ballance stated that the arts centres that are dependent financially on a high box office are at significant financial risk at the moment. He stated that the Arts Council is currently tracking the finances of all arts centres, with some centres being more at risk than others. There are also plans in place to conduct meetings for arts centres with regard to how to strategize the uncertainty of the future. VB stated that the current Arts Council strategy (2016-2025), Making Great Art Work, is very significant at this time as it emphasises supporting artists and diversifying audiences. He stated that many arts centres are suited, or should be suited, to supporting artists and it was important to push this concept going forward. VB also stated that traditional arts spaces (e.g. auditoriums) are not usable for a significant amount of time. As such, exploring non-traditional ways of presenting work would diversify audiences. He stated that the survival of arts organisations will not be a difficulty for the majority and stated that the real challenges will be in 2021.

DML referred back to his earlier point relating to a period of transition. He proposed that this period would be made up of three stages: survival, recovery and reconfiguration. However, he remarked that these stages may occur in a non-linear way. He said that it was crucial for the artists and arts workers to survive but reiterated that the biggest problem is not being taken seriously by the government. He remarked that the sector is too low down on the priority list and emphasised the importance of sending consistent messages to the government on this.

Rachel West expressed a feeling of fatigue with regard to the repetitiveness of the conversations that were currently happening and expressed a desire to put a plan in place and strategize. She stated that although the Arts Council strategy (2016-2025), Making Great Art Work, will still be useful during this time, it will need to be looked at from a fresh perspective. She expressed concern with regard to sustaining an interest in the arts from the public. She proposed that co-productions with arts centres which have longer runs may be a viable option going forward. DT remarked that although there was repetition in the conversations with arts centres, festivals have not yet had the opportunity to have such discussions until now.

CF expressed concern with the thoughts of 2 ½ years as a period of transition. She stated that she is only able to think of 2020 in terms of planning. CF stated that there was a lack of expertise in the area of online production amongst arts centre managers. She stated that a lot of arts workers are grappling to self-teach and suggested that there should be centralised funding allocated to providing educational opportunities in this area. SK also remarked that there may be a need for training in other areas including diversifying income streams and also speaking to government officials.

**VB, DML, AD, COB left the meeting**

KW remarked that festivals are nimble but not particularly resilient. He stated that they are largely reliant on social capital and, at the moment, are experiencing collapsing income streams. He questioned if there was an opportunity to link festivals, arts centres and artists and also if partnership and collaboration were key in the survival of festivals during this time. MOB responded to this by saying that she had no concerns with regard to collaboration and creativity. She remarked that the main area of concern is funding and compared the response of the Irish government to that of other governments across the world. ENH concurred with MOB, however remarked that the relationships between both festivals and arts centres need to be supported as both need each other for survival. KW concurred with this, stating that festivals often do not survive due to volunteer burnout and both festivals and arts centres can potentially ensure survival by sharing resources.

**RW left the meeting**

DT concluded the session by reminding participants of the larger discussions taking place at the end of June. He remarked that the energy from this session was different from other discussions and highlighted the value of getting perspectives from both festivals and arts centres.

END.

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