

## Talking Festivals Curated Conversations, Session 6

### *Post Covid - What's the 'new normal'?*

**Friday 19th June 2020**

**2-3.30pm**

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has created enormous challenges for the festival sector in Ireland. Not only have many festivals had to cancel their planned 2020 programme but many have been working to devise innovative ways to sustain ongoing work with the artist community and maintain some links with the public. There has been much debate about the value of using virtual platforms with festivals coming to different conclusions dictated by artform suitability, time and budget availability. Is a festival still a festival when relocating to the online space?

### **In Attendance**

Organisation	Contributor	Arts Practice/Artform area
Dublin Dance Festival	Benjamin Perchet	Dance
Irish International Harp Festival	Aibhlin McCrann	Traditional Arts
Baltimore Fiddle Festival	Declan McCarthy	Traditional Arts
Galway Arts Festival	John Crumlish	MDA
West Cork Music	Francis Humphries	Music
Ennis Book club	Cora Gunter	Literature
Galway Film Fleadh	Miriam Allen	Film

Arts Council	Karl Wallace Victoria O'Brien Fionnuala Sweeney Niall Doyle	Head of Festivals Dance Advisor Head of Film Head of Music
Birr 2020	Dermot McLaughlin	
Dublin Fringe Festival	Ruth McGowan	MDA

### Apologies

Claire Power – Co-Head of Visual Arts

### Minutes

David Teevan began the introduction by referencing the inaugural Change Makers Festivals' Conference. He referred to the freedom associated with that event in comparison to the restrictions that currently exist for festivals. He remarked that the feedback from attendees was that the conference was incredibly valuable in terms of creating a networking space for festival makers. Since the COVID crisis there have been requests from festival makers for more opportunities for meeting and connection, as such these digital sessions were launched. In addition, there is a distinct lack of opportunities for problem sharing amongst festival makers in comparison to other arts workers. DT remarked that although the formats for these sessions were similar, each discussion was different. As the ecology of the festivals sector is incredibly diverse, each festival responded to the health crisis differently. Because of this, no one solution is applicable to all festivals emphasising the importance of these discussions for information sharing amongst participants and information gathering for the Arts Council.

Karl Wallace echoed this introduction and emphasised that these sessions are distinct from the corporate, sector-wide exercise that will be conducted by Olwen Dawe on behalf of the Arts Council in the future. He remarked that if there are any questions regarding the extra additional funding recently received from the Government, it would be best for the participants to speak to their own individual relationship managers about this.

### **Cora Gunter - Ennis Book Club Festival**

CG is the Chair of the EBCF. The festival took place this year on the first weekend in March. As such, they are currently concerned about planning for the 2021 iteration of the festival. She stated that at the beginning of the year, there were plans in place to look for a new Artistic Director of the festival. This went ahead and Dani Gill was hired in June. CG remarked that although the festival took place, there was still hesitancy amongst festival goers about large gatherings. Because of this they saw a small percentage drop in audience numbers. With this in mind, Cora stated that one of her major concerns was how to instil a sense of confidence amongst audience goers with regard to returning to arts events. She referenced Glór Irish Music Centre who are currently only expecting to attract ½ of their audience once they are reopened. She also referenced the Cuirt International Festival of Literature and was delighted to see the success of their online festival. CG also expressed concerns about income streams and what the EBCF will look like next year. DT referenced that the festival experienced a cancellation two years ago due to a storm. He stated that they were aware of the difficulties a cancellation causes and was glad for their sake that they did not have to go through it again this year.

### **Benjamin Perchet - Dublin Dance Festival**

The programme for the DDF was launched on the 10th of March with the festival dates intended to be the 19th - 21st of May. On the 20th of March the festival was cancelled. BP stated that the main intention of the festival is to present international dance companies to Irish artists and audiences. Quickly they realised that this would not be possible for this year and they also wanted to be in a position where they could still cancel accommodation and limit any financial losses. BP stated that they did not want to migrate the festival online; however they did create a “capsule collection” which was hosted online. The collection did not contain full scale production pieces, but gave dance artists the opportunity to connect with each other and with audiences through other initiatives, e.g. interviews. BP remarked that he was prepared for disappointment with regard to the audience response to this collection. However, the response was very positive with over 6000 unique visitors to their website, 80% of which were new audience members and 20% returning. He stated that 100% of Irish artists who were due to be programmed in the festival were paid fees in full and international companies were paid between 60-90% of fees and expenses depending on other subsidies and supports which they could access locally. BP remarked that he is not aiming to postpone more than two works to the 2021 iteration of the festival. Currently the festival team is scenario planning for next year's edition, taking into account all possible options. He remarked that if international travel resumes, the festival can return to how it was. However, if not, the festival will be very different.

### **Declan McCarthy - Baltimore Fiddle Fair**

The Baltimore Fiddle Fair takes place on the 2nd weekend in May. DMC stated that over 50% of the audience for the festival usually travel from abroad. He stated that after cancellation, he contacted all of the artists due to perform and rebooked them to next year. After that he decided to have an online iteration of the festival. He asked for artists and audience members to both send in short videos of performances and messages of support. These were compiled into a collection of one hour videos which were released on each of the four nights of the festival. Similarly to BP, DMC was surprised at the success of the initiative. He remarked that in terms of social media interaction, it was the most successful iteration of their festival. It facilitated a lot of connection between artists and audience members, which he felt at times was emotional. In addition, it raised over €7,500 in donations. He remarked that each of the artists that were due to perform were paid 50% of their fee. He stated that he was not sure what the format of the festival would look like next year, however, this year has opened up new audiences for them.

### **Miriam Allen - Galway Film Fleadh**

The Galway Film Fleadh takes place this year from the 7th - 12th of July. MA remarked that after a period of denial, a decision was made to bring the entire festival online. She stated that she had made contact with a number of festivals around Europe who had already produced an online festival and had learned a lot from them. MA stated that there were technical aspects around piracy and distribution which she found challenging. She also found it difficult persuading film makers to allow the festival to screen their films online as these films had been worked on for the last 3-5 years and had been made to be experienced by a live audience. She responded to this difficulty by selling the sense of community around the Fleadh. This was emphasised by their ticketing process where they intend to sell the same amount of tickets to an online viewing as would be sold in a physical, real-life screening. She remarked that their panel discussions would be free to attend, but the film viewings would be sold at €6.50 or €7.00 a ticket depending on the time of day. Their master class program was cancelled as she felt that people can only tolerate a limited amount of time on Zoom calls. MA stated that hiring a technical manager to deal with the shift online was an important decision. A new website was created to host the films online and their current website was also revamped. She also stated that she had to confirm if these films would be eligible for Oscar consideration after being hosted online, which they are. MA stated that the whole process is very exciting and she expressed an eagerness to launch the programme and the festival itself. She stated that she would fear for a physical Fleadh if social distancing is still in operation in 2021. She expressed gratitude towards the Arts Council for honouring their funding which gave the festival some breathing room as the rest of their sponsorship was lost. DT responded to this by stating that the sector has gained a lot of knowledge during this crisis which has equipped it with a bigger toolkit for years to come.

### **Francis Humphrys - West Cork Music**

FH began by echoing MA's remark regarding Arts Council funding, stating that it gave WCM the security to move ahead. He stated that the Chamber Music Festival booking began in January and was cancelled in March. The decision to cancel was made after approaching both artists and audience members to gauge their responses. He stated that over €50,000 was paid in cancellation fees to the musicians. He remarked that permission was granted from Lyric FM for the festival to release last year's recordings from an archive that they had been working on together. He also stated that after reaching out to musicians to film and broadcast performances, he organised a number of recordings to take place all over the world. This was difficult to manage at the start as each country had different regulations. These recordings will be broadcast each day of the festival which takes place next Friday. FH remarked that the West Cork Literary Festival is going ahead in a predominantly online manner. Eimear O'Herlihy is organising this from Greece. He remarked that some of their online workshops are sold out online. Regarding the Masters of Tradition, this will be hosted in a socially distant format at the end of August. He remarked that all concerts will be taking place in a local hotel which has the capacity and the space to bring in a reasonable box office. FH expressed concern about next year's iteration of the festival. Whilst referring to the Arts Council advisory committee, he felt that it was optimistic to feel that all would return to normal next July. He referenced a festival in Italy who had been doing a series of short concerts to small audiences. He is planning to do a significant number of concerts around Bantry in a number of different venues. FH remarked that it was a big learning exercise but may have to do something similar next year. DT responded to this by emphasising the importance of a reasonable box office for certain festivals to ensure survival.

### **Aibhlin McCrann – Cairde na Cruite / International Irish Harp Festival**

The IIHP runs from the last week of June to early July. AMC remarked that it was a small, niche, voluntary run festival which is dedicated to promoting the harp in Ireland as the national instrument. The festival will be 35 years old next year and has an audience of local and national harp enthusiasts. She remarked that, contrary to the Galway Film Fleadh, the festival does not have the resources to hire a technical manager or team. She remarked that she didn't initially feel the dynamism associated with the physical engagement of the festival could be replicated online, but after a significant amount of time and effort, found it was possible. She did feel it was important to keep some sort of engagement between audiences and performers during this time. As such, the festival is running a series of events online. These events will consist of three lunchtime concerts, which will be funded by the Arts Council. She remarked that they hoped to stage a physical festival next year but doubted that would happen, emphasising again that they did not have the resources to do something virtual. AMC stated that the impact of the loss of the physical festival at a local level was considerable. The regular residential accommodation

which is associated with the festival will lose over €40,000 income this year. In addition, AK remarked that she is seeing first-hand the difficulties artists are facing due to loss of earnings. She suggested that the Arts Council liaise with local authorities in order to see what they are doing to support local artists, emphasising that there should be a consistent approach amongst all local authorities with regard to this crisis. DT responded to this by saying that all local economies are suffering as is evident through the responses of festival makers at previous discussions. KW added that there is currently discussion taking place with the local authorities to establish what measures they are taking place but indications are that these are not collective actions. He also noted that the provision of arts services is inconsistent at present through the local authorities with some arts office staff redeployed into emergency Covid or community response units instead.

### **John Crumlish – Galway International Arts Festival**

JC remarked that the overriding feeling during this crisis was a feeling of sadness for the production crew, artists and arts workers who are all entering a period of uncertainty. He questioned whether or not artists and arts workers will last in this sector during this crisis. He remarked that a lot of the GIAF employees rely on the festival for a significant portion of their income and expressed worry that a lot of talented people will leave the sector because of financial pressure. With this in mind, he expressed concern with regard to holding together a good festival team. He stated that the festival's Autumn programme is going ahead with a lot of what they had planned still in operation but remarked that a lot more work is now necessary with regard to producing live events. JC expressed concern with regard to how to stay connected to their loyal audiences. He also remarked on the difficulties of obtaining venues for the festivals and stated that two of their regular spaces are now being used by the HSE. He expressed that digital platforms will play a much bigger part going forward and highlighted the benefits of this with regard to accessing remote audiences. He emphasised that the job of the festival was to create great arts experiences and remarked that being adaptable will be key going forward.

### **Ruth McGowan – Dublin Fringe Festival**

RMG stated that the DFF was in the unusual position of still going ahead, however remarked that Fringe as it usually would happen was impossible. The festival is due to begin on the 5th of September and the time leading up to it has given the team the privilege of recalibrating the festival. The team set about un-producing the original festival and, whilst consulting with artists, thinking about what they could do instead. She echoed JC by stating that it was imperative to stay connected with audiences but also remarked on the importance of finding solutions which would still allow work to be created. She stated that the key goals of the festival were artform development and talent development. Currently, they are planning a pilot light edition of the

festival which will be a mixture of live and online experience, but also experiences via other connection routes, e.g. post. She stated that 50 projects from their Fringe Lab were selected to be supported with master classes. She expressed a desire to support as many artists as possible but did not want to give up on festival making. RMG remarked on the importance of respecting the digital arts as its own distinct artform and emphasised that she doesn't have experience in that area. She stated that the biggest learning experience for her was related to staying nimble. The constantly shifting landscape called on the devotion and ingenuity of artists and staff who are all motivated to do the best they can.

## **Discussion**

DT stated that the introductions contained a lot of rich and relevant information. He asked attendees if there was anything they would like to address that had not been covered. MA concurred with remarks made by JC stating that the continuity of staff was a huge concern for her. She remarked that she felt a sense of mourning for the festival that was planned that never would be. DT responded to this by stating that other festival makers have felt this loss. He emphasised the importance of recording these festivals even if they were cancelled.

DT asked MA to speak more about the online Film Fleadh and if it would offer any networking opportunities as this is a huge part of the festival. MA responded that the festival had pivoted their Marketplace online. The Marketplace is a regular part of the festival and coordinates meetings between festival makers and industry executives. She also remarked at the response to their pitching competition which had received over 250 submissions from all over the world in contrast to the 100-120 submissions they would usually receive.

AMC encouraged the Arts Council festival team to explore how to convince and encourage audiences to return to arts events. She stated that there will be challenges to ensure venues stay and feel safe for the public. BP remarked that he felt a sense of sadness at the loss of collaborating with Arts & Disability Ireland, remarking that the art of dance can be a cathartic and tactile experience for people with disabilities.

KW asked the group if they have had any guidance on holding events outdoors or are they developing their own guidelines in terms of social distancing. JC remarked that the GIAF have employed an expert in that area to help with such matters. RMG stated that Dublin is a notoriously challenging city for holding outdoor events and is one of the worst in Europe. She stated that the DFF are currently trying to figure out what they can do in that regard and remarked that the OPW has been a great source of support. She went on to say that they are currently building their own rule book and their biggest challenge is sourcing sites.

Fionnuala Sweeney thanked everyone for their contributions. She remarked on how many opportunities have been identified despite the existential challenges arts organisations are facing and commended the sense of support and information sharing amongst attendees. She hoped that further government announcements would make things easier for festival makers.

DT asked the group to expand on any information or suggestions they had with regard to planning for next year. JC stated that although festivals are adaptable, they are also vulnerable because of their verified income models. He stated that the GIAF income was down 75%. He stated that festivals have various income streams and questioned what would happen to festivals if those streams began to disappear. CG expanded on this by stating that festivals are also revenue streams and are a big part of other incomes. AMC referenced the Arts Councils current strategy and stated that festivals have the greatest impact on audiences. Although DT agreed on the importance of festivals for arts engagement, he also recognised the importance of other platforms like arts centres.

### **FS left the meeting**

Niall Doyle thanked all participants and remarked that it was interesting to see all of the commonalities. He referenced the increase of funding recently received from the Government and remarked that this was a positive indication that the arts are valued by the state. He remarked that although it was great to see all the new initiatives and work being created online, it is still important to recognise all the work that was lost. He stated that core to what we do is the live experience and it was important to see that a goal for a healthy future.

### **ND and RMG left the meeting**

KW remarked that these festival conversations will be on going as the sector is so broad and diverse that there is more room for conversation. He outlined that a series of talks will take place with smaller festivals in late June/July followed by a conversation with both Irish artists and festivals and their international counterparts.

He outlined that the Events Industry Association of Ireland are offering Covid officer safety training courses accredited through the Industry Federation of Ireland and this might be worth further investigation.

DT concluded the session by remarking on the still healthy festival circuit. He also remarked on the connections between festival makers which may have been strengthened by the COVID crisis.

End.

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