

Talking Festivals Live and Digital, Session 2

Festival Making in the face of COVID '19

Saturday 27th June 2020

11.00am – 12.30pm

These online discussions are designed for small to medium scale festivals and will provide an opportunity to share information and knowledge and to discuss the merits, challenges, opportunities and restrictions facing festivals as they plan programmes for reconfigured public spaces and explore online sharing of the arts. What creative solutions are there for festivals in reimagining how to engage the public with the arts?

In attendance

Organisation	Contributor	Arts Practice/Artform area
Dublin Fringe Festival	Ruth McGowan (Chair)	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Arts Council	Dr David Teevan (Moderator)	Festival Advisor to the Arts Council
Arts Council	Karl Wallace	Head of Festivals, Arts Council
Arts Council	Regina O'Shea	Festivals and Venues Officer, Arts Council
An Chúirt Chruitreachta, International Festival for Irish Harp	Aibhlin McCrann	Traditional Arts
East Cork Early Music Festival	Catriona O'Mahony	Music
John Dwyer Trad Fest,	Ollie Breslin	Traditional Arts, Literature and MDA

Bray Literary Festival	Nessa O'Mahony	Literature
Light Moves Festival	Mary Wycherley	Dance
Féile Traidphicnic	Bridge Barker	Traditional Arts
Achill International Harp Festival	Laoise Kelly	Traditional Arts
Imagine Arts Festival	Nora Boland	MDA
Mother Tongues	Francesca La Morgia	MDA
Galway Early Music Festival	Maire O'Cronin	Music
Birr Festival of Music and Voice	Maureen de Forge	Music
Clonakilty International Guitar Festival	Kevin McNally	Music
Offline Film Festival	Gary Hoctor	Film
West Cork and Blackwater Fit-up Festivals	Geoff Gould	Theatre
Ortús Chamber Music Festival	Sinead O'Halloran	Music
Music in Monkstown	John Finucane	Music
Dublin Book Festival	Julianne Siron	Literature
Cashel Arts Festival	Sara McGeachy	MDA

Inishowen Traditional Music Project	Roisin McGrory	Traditional Arts
Galway County Council	Sharon O'Grady	Local Authority Arts Officer

Minutes

David Teevan welcomed the participants and introduced himself as a former festival maker of Clonmel Junction Festival for 15 years. He is also an academic and the festivals advisor to the Arts Council for the last 4 years. He introduced Ruth McGowan, Director of Dublin Fringe Festival, who will facilitate the conversation.

This series of meetings started in February when the Arts Council ran the Change Makers conference in Limerick. 250 festival makers were brought together of all artforms and sizes. The interaction was incredibly important. One month later the landscape had changed completely due to Covid 19.

Festivals approached Karl Wallace to organise meetings for festivals as other artforms have their own resource organisations e.g. Visual Artists Ireland, Theatre Forum. So in response to those requests the festival team arranged a number of these sessions. 6 workshops have taken place and there will be 4 of these sessions. These sessions are to discuss the themes of live and digital work. What are festivals concerns and how do they do 'live' in the current situation. This is not knowledge that any one festival has, so this is a space to share concerns and knowledge. They will be an open source and so the minutes of each session will be shared online.

The Festivals team is responsible for planning and writing policy for the future and as part of that listening, they have invited some local authority officers to join the meeting to listen and witness the conversation.

Dr. Theresa Ryan and Dr. Bernadette Quinn from the Technical University of Dublin are also joining the meeting and are working on an EU funded project 'Festivals public space and cultural inclusion'. Part of their research is learning about how festivals are responding to the COVID crisis. Attendees can contact David or Karl if they would prefer not to have their opinions included in the research although it will be general information and not attributed to any one person. They will also write a reflection on today's session.

Attendees were encouraged to use the chat forum and that chat would also be saved and shared.

Karl Wallace thanked everyone for attending the meeting today to discuss the challenges facing festival organisations at this time - festivals meetings such as these are critically important to the festivals sector and although there is a limited run of these sessions he encouraged the participants to exchange information with each other so they could keep talking to one another. He thanked both David and Ruth for moderating and facilitating the session, and all the preparation they put in to get to this point during what is a very busy time.

The Arts Council's interest in hosting these sessions is to provide an opportunity for festivals to meet and discuss the current challenges and opportunities arising from the Covid pandemic and also to gather intelligence from the festivals sector about how they can better support festivals in the short to medium term.

The Council's priority in festivals is to ensure there is a diverse ecology of festival practice taking place across the country. Festivals are seen not just as essential platforms for artists to showcase and develop work and for audiences to engage in the arts, but also as contributors to their local economies, their communities and for articulating their identities and histories.

There are at present just under 170 festival programmes supported by the Arts Council, of which about 130 are small to mid-scale in operation and take place across the country on islands, in villages and towns providing a vital diverse ecology of artform practice essential to local arts infrastructures and a necessary supply chain of arts experiences for the public. It is therefore the interest of the Council that these festivals find ways to sustain themselves in these very challenging times and continue to receive programmatic support.

To that end the Government's stimulus package for the arts will provide supports to ensure there is an effective response in supporting artists and organisations at this time. The detail of these supports will follow in due course and he encouraged the attendees to stay in touch with us about that.

In addition the Council has just approved and adopted a Festival's policy to run from this year until 2025 which outlines priorities of how festivals can build capacity and develop further, not just with AC support but also with the support of other public agencies. It is encouraging to see some local authority arts officer colleagues joining the meeting today as they play a vital role in sustaining and enabling festival projects. Their continued support during this particular time and into the future seems even more critical. Thank you for being here today.

Ruth McGowan is the Director of Dublin Fringe Festival. The festival is 16 days and nights of a multi-disciplinary arts festival. In a normal year the festival would have many premieres. The festival team was thanked for convening the meeting and to everyone for coming. The meeting is to share goals, new problems and if there are any solutions to any of the problems discussed. Festival making is vital to the community and everyone in the meeting cares very much.

Provocation 1

Every festival is different, but all festivals are now working in an altered context. All of our plans and processes have been forced to change. How do we navigate the challenge of staying true to our festival's identity, while working in a new way?

Kevin McNally – Clonakilty International Guitar Festival

This festival is about the town. People walk around and find their own way. It's due to take place in September and they are hoping they may be able to have some live things in their programme. Live streaming and not leaving the house is a problem for their festival. They are hoping that they can put a gig on in a venue and stream to other venues in the town at the same time to give it some sense of physical action.

Comment: That gives the audience a sense of shared experiences while still trying to preserve the liveness.

Aileen McCrann - An Chúirt Chruitireachta, International Festival for Irish Harp

They are working hard to maintain integrity and ongoing relationships with their artists. They are focused on the quality of the artistic performances and not the number of them. They don't have technical support and questions are being raised around the remuneration of artists. How are artists paid for their footage from previous years? There is a lot of pressure on artists to be able to record good quality work.

John Finucane – Music in Monkstown

They have a large availability of online recordings as they got permission at the time of last year's festival from the artists to use their work in the future and they were professionally recorded at the time. The festival is due to take place in September this year and they are not quite sure yet of its final format. They usually bring artists from abroad and they had planned to fly in a duo from Paris and a group from London. The London group will now not travel but the Paris duo may still go ahead. The plan so far is to reduce the festival size to 2 evenings and 1 afternoon and they would be happy if they could get those up and running. The festival takes place in the church which currently has a capacity of 42 with social distancing but they are hoping by the time the festival takes place this will rise to 100. Artists would rather perform to 20 audience members in a live audience than to go online and the festival doesn't want to diminish their truth. Most festivals are funded through a combination of Arts Council funding,

box office and local advertising. Advertising income won't be there this year and that will be tricky for a lot of festivals. This festival knows a lot of their audience and has been asking them if they would go to a live concert if it was safe to do so and they have all said yes.

Comment – allowing the artist to lead is great. Some artists are excited to go digital for a new experience and others are not and that has to be respected.

Comment – How festivals respond in the now with the technological challenges. Everyone is learning new skills and it's important so that they can maintain high production quality.

Comment – All festivals now have a new budget line for digital dissemination and this often costs more than fees for artists. It is a priority to protect artist's fees.

Bridge Barker - Féile Traidphicnic

The festival is next weekend from Friday to Sunday. It's a community festival and the committee has reacted in the best way they could in the circumstances. They have prerecorded a live event. They have drawn up a Covid plan. They are a voluntary committee and are lucky to have huge community support. The Festival is 3 nights and the Saturday is split into 2 parts. They did a tour from Barna to Carna in the Gaeltacht area and met with a group of young people on the pier and put together a film from village to village. They have just confirmed they've got the ceili bus to do 30 minute performances at 3 nursing homes. To have camera and stage fees is a normal cost for them. They are reaching further with their audiences as a result. All Artists for this year's programme have been invited back for next year. They are also going to film 3 local gigs prerecorded. It's not ideal but all they could do in the time they had.

Comment – the engagement work for a festival like this is much longer than the festival length. Its ongoing work and the festival should be congratulated.

Sinead O'Halloran – Ortus Chamber Music Festival

Ortus festival took place in February and early March so they were lucky that they got to complete their festival just before the restrictions came into place. They are now in the position of figuring out how to run next years festival. They have a question on how to deal with ticket sales for online performances or donations. Their audience is older and more fearful to attend

events but also not as comfortable with how to donate or purchase tickets online. How do you allow for this when you're putting together your application for 2021? Should they reduce their ticket prices, are other festivals doing that if work is moving online?

Comment – Cuirt festival received about 10,000 euro in donations online but this would be only 1/3 of their previous box office amounts. There are some issues around international audiences and money. Some festivals are looking at pay per view audiences like Limerick Jazz Festival as they want to protect the artist and their work. It's important to speak to other festivals that have been through this already. Bray Literary festival is another one.

Catriona O'Mahony – East Cork Early Music Festival

Their festival is due to take place in October. You have to look at what is possible that wasn't possible to do in a normal time? Online you can bring tiny venues to audiences. And you can 'travel' to where you couldn't, with a live audience.

Nessa O'Mahony – Bray Literary Festival

How do audiences respond is a good question? There is a debate going on at the moment about charging or not charging for online work. If the programming is good and well produced you should be prepared to pay for that work. Is there too much online at the moment? The pay per view idea is very interesting. If you are making good work in an online environment you must respect the work enough not to give it away for free.

Maire O'Cronin – Galway Early Music Festival

This festival was due to take place in May, and it had to be cancelled at very short notice. It is an international festival and wants to run next year. They have live audiences and record. They are planning to put concerts on repeat to meet their box office targets. The only way they feel they can charge for online work is if the output is excellent. Currently they don't have the expertise or the budget for that. It also depends on how the audience reception is and how they are viewing the work. There is a ticketing agency that offers 2 streams of tickets: live and online.

Geoff Gould - West Cork and Blackwater Fit-up Festivals

This festival doesn't feel that digital works for them. They run 2 festivals and they were lucky that the first was in Jan/Feb. The second festival is due to take place July/Aug for 5 weeks on 6

islands. The Islands don't want people there and they have to respect that but it's still up to them to find a way to share the work. They are following the church rules. They open on the 2nd August and are hoping to do 10 nights in Ballydehob Community Hall. They may end up with a double festival next year because of these changes. The committee has allowed them 9 nights and they had a 5 hour meeting about Covid procedures and contact tracing and cleaning etc. With no box office they will need to bring in a big hitter to try and get the audience back and maybe put 1 or 2 emerging artists in between them. They feel that it's important to get people back out. The Arts have never been as important as it is now.

Comment – It is important that you stay true to your festival and it's important you know who you are and if digital isn't for you that you're not just doing it anyway.

Francesca La Morgia – Mother Tongues Festival

A lot of their festival involves children so their rules are similar to school rules. The festival took place in February but they could see the parents of some of the children were starting to get nervous at that point. However they feel that the shared experience is more important than watching it somewhere. A lot of the artists involved in this festival are migrants and the idea is to come to the festival for something you like and then pop into something else while you're there. People won't pay for these artists online and there is no alternative for them. The festival is more about coming together.

Comment – There is a common thread in a lot of festivals that they are taking a hybrid approach for the future to allow them to remain nimble and flexible.

Mary Wycherley – Light Moves Festival

This is an artist led festival in Limerick. They've been on a year of strategic review and part of that process is listening and taking stock. They are now beginning to consider next year's festival. There is a shift in how people engage online because the habits are so different. People tend to flit in and out with social media and as a viewer. There is interesting work to be done on preparing audiences on how to support them and how to engage with content. Visibility and maintaining relationships with artists and audiences is an important question and how festivals can nurture many artists struggling with their isolation.

Nora Boland – Waterford Imagine Arts Festival

Their festival is due to take place in October and they are hoping to go ahead with live audiences. The biggest problems are the venues and their audience's confidence. Their festival usually tries to put art in quirky places like churches and cafes but these aren't an option this year. Garter Lane and Theatre Royal are trying to reopen and work out their numbers. Commercial buildings have higher rent. They expect to have a lower box office and they are trying to work out how they can bring the festival with a lower income. They are working with some of the galleries in the city. At the moment they are asking themselves do they just have a small number of performances in venues that are already safe, and have their PPE available and their Covid training in place. They are also looking at working with their local funded venues so that they can support them because they can't open without work being available to them and support artists work.

Comment – The work of venues and festivals are symbiotic in their relationships especially at this time.

Julianne Siron – Dublin Book Festival

This festival is taking place in November and they are going digital. They are prerecording 20 events in Dublin venues. Publishers weren't sure about getting authors to commit to coming over due to a threat of a second wave of Covid. The biggest venues they use have a limited audience now of 24 which they couldn't do financially. They had to let go of their Winter garden. They are looking at allowing people to stream to their TV a series of live events. They do have commitment from a number of authors. They are looking for the future at the problem of if you will keep your audience with no live events.

Laoise Kelly - Achill International Harp Festival

This festival happens at the end of October. Every decision keeps changing. They are going ahead but they can't bring in artists so they are highlighting Irish artists. They have cut the programme from 4 days to 3. They will be streaming online as they don't have any venues. They have had to build stages and using generators. They want it to look amazing but not just a gig. The hall they use had previously space for 220 but they want the artists to have some sort of audience to bounce off. They want to make sure that the work is high quality but at the moment they don't know how much it will cost or where to go to find out this information. They are not a technical team and would need to apply for further funding from the Arts Council for these costs.

Maureen de Forge – Birr Festival of Music and Voice

Their festival was due to take place in May but was postponed to November. They are looking at performance opportunities and master classes for young artists. They are offering bursaries to young musicians and singers. 6 have been selected and they come to Birr for classes. The other part of the festival is their concerts. They usually have International artists in the streets, venues, in shops and supermarkets, but they can't do their young children's choral group this year. They are lucky to have expertise in Gary Hoctor from Offline Film Festival for filming and streaming but the festival still needs to be very much reduced. They do feel that there is currently too much online. They are pre filming and editing to send out work but their income is way down. A lot of their patrons advertising have gone down but they are going ahead. There is a minimum audience for the recorded performances. Although the children's choir can't happen they have moved a performance towards Christmas in the hope that they can do something. There is little or no box office but much larger costs so they are hoping to use some of their funding for that. For a classical audience in a small town they feel that something is missing.

Provocation 2

We are thinking both practically and philosophically about festival making in a time of pandemic,

Balancing solving immediate problems with future proof planning. What do you need in the next six months to do your work? (From key partners, from funders etc.) What actions would be useful to you in the short term?

- Good Internet connections
- Streamlined application processes form multi agencies
- How to build confidence in audiences

Provocation 3

What do you need in the next year to do your work? (What should we be asking our partners and funders for in the medium term? What are the resources or skills you feel you need to adapt and thrive?)

- Security of funding
- Clear guidelines around insurance
- Clear guidelines on contact tracing

- Could the Arts Council provide Covid compliance courses, or get a group rate for them (Peter Lombard is an expert that was suggested)

David Teevan – Comment – There is an underlying level of positiveness in all of these meetings. Festivals are taking on challenges while remaining true to their mission. Festivals will be heading in to the next year rich in a new reserve of skills that they didn't have before all of this.

Sharon O'Grady – Galway County Council Arts Officer

Sharon is delighted to hear the experiences of the different festivals. Galway County Council is trying to support the festivals they have already funded and also Culture Night. Personally Sharon is not a big fan about online and loves live audiences. There can be pressure on festivals that they feel they have to do something when in fact this is not always the right choice. All local authorities should be paying out on grants promised. The majority are managing to hold on to their budgets. Festival need to try and see if they can get what they were offered. There needs to be some sort of team to assist festivals in their event planning, guides through the venues and small live events. There is concern for the long term and festivals need to skill up as quickly as possible. Perhaps there could be a team that is paid and offer bookable hours. This would be a valuable resource. Without festivals there would be so little happening on the ground. They are essential.

Ruth thanked all of today's participants for a very energising conversation and encouraged them all to continue to talk to each other and their funders. Keep asking for what you need.

Karl closed the meeting by thanking everyone for a valuable and rich conversation and thanked Ruth for coordinating it all so well.

END.