

Talking Festivals Live and Digital, Session 4

Festival Making in the face of COVID

Wednesday 8th July 2020

3.00 – 4.30pm

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
Arts Council	Karl Wallace	Head of Festivals, Arts Council
Arts Council	Dr David Teevan (Moderator)	Festival Advisor to the Arts Council
Arts Council	Regina O'Shea (Minutes)	Festivals and Venues Officer
Cork Midsummer Festival	Lorraine Maye (Chair)	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Limerick Literary Festival	Ella Daly	Literature
Great Music in Irish Houses Festival	Ciara Higgins	Music
Cork International Film Festival	Fiona Clark	Film

Kerry County Council	Kate Kennelly	Arts Officer
Baboró International Arts Festival for Children	Jennifer Ahern	YPCE
Tread Softly	Michael Carty	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Spleodar Halloween Arts Festival	Eva Birdthistle	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Chamber Music on Valentia	Darragh Morgan	Music
Gospel Rising Music Festival	Mary Neylon	Music
Dublin Dance Festival	Benjamin Perchet	Dance
Another Love Story	Emmet Condon	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Quarter Block Party	Ruairí Ó'Donnabháin	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Big Bang Festival	Brian Fleming	Music
Feile na Tana	John McIntyre	Traditional Arts
Clonmel Junction Festival	Cliona Maher	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Strokestown International Poetry Festival	Gemma Flanagan	Literature

Minutes

David Teevan welcomed the participants and introduced himself. He introduced *Lorraine Maye*, Director of Cork Midsummer Festival, to chair and 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.

There have been 6 festival discussions take place with a smaller group of festivals and themed particular to their practice. The four larger more general discussions, such as this one are to discuss the current challenges of presenting live and digital work in festivals. This is not knowledge that any one festival has, so this is a space to share concerns and knowledge. The learning will be open source and so the minutes of each session will be shared online.

Local Authority arts officers will join us for the conversation. They are very welcome.

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 Wallace 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 - festival 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 Lorraine 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 the Arts Council can better support festivals in the short to medium term.

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 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.

Lorraine Maye thanked the Arts Council for bringing these groups of people together. It's a great opportunity for networking for festivals at all different stages. There has been a lot of difficult learning. She explained that in planning the programme it was important for Cork Midsummer festival which was a mixture of live and online, to keep looking back on their strategic plan.

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?

Benjamin Perchet – Dublin Dance Festival

When they decided to run a 10 day online edition they didn't want to put their original planned programme online. They didn't want to give full online access to audiences of full length pieces. They wanted to bring International and Irish artists to Irish audiences. They observed that both on stage and online, the most popular elements of the programme were the international acts. They tried to have elements for everyone and then some for the industry. They had short films, documentaries, behind the scenes and commissioned written articles about artists that were due to be in their original programme. They were very surprised by the audience figures as they were quite good. For next year the challenge is to bring international artists to Dublin. They are planning, rather than bringing a company with two works, to ask two international choreographers to present their work with Irish dancers. They would present their work on stage so they can take advantage of international choreographers for Irish artists. They are happy to think of an Irish programme, but there are not a lot of contemporary dancers in Ireland. So although a full Irish programme sounds lovely it's not possible. They found the digital experience was constructive although they were originally reluctant.

Comment – Festivals are starting to think more locally and trying to keep the international mix to refresh the ecology.

Clíona Maher – Clonmel Junction Festival

Clíona remembers hearing Ali Fitzgibbons workshop at the Changemakers conference saying that when you are making a decision you should always look back to your mission statement. Junction Festivals mission statement is to provide a platform for local artists. They had to look at what was possible to do with the restrictions. They had an Arts Trail that submissions were in on the 19th March. The rest followed on what the artists came back with. Some people with lack of access to technology or their emotional state were unable to do things online. The festivals timing gave them enough time to have better production values than if they had had to do something instantly. People are happy they went ahead. Audiences have been huge but there is also a strong local audience. Also because it's online people are watching things that wouldn't have paid to see. They are using a channel called dacast that you can set up analytics that are easy to capture. Tipperary County Council has funded them to Work with Úna Carmody to look at the results.

Eva Birdthistle - Spleodar Halloween Arts Festival

They have a small festival in June for children that is Local authority funded. They spent about 6 weeks trying to find a robust digital platform. They found one called Eventive which is a virtual online film festival platform which was quite robust at the start and in line with Vimeo Pro. It showed that the majority of the audience came from Dublin, then Tipperary, then Japan and America. It was exciting to see opened opportunities. Although they were geo blocked it meant that the audience were using things like tunnel bear to access the site. Their larger children's festival funded by the Arts council is October and they are looking at a blended approach, online and in house. They're unsure about a second wave, so they are going to record workshops in house and put them online. People are zoomed out. They want really good quality. They do a huge amount of children's workshops so if they have to do it online the children can collect materials from the arts centre and then do a workshop online. They are using the channel to show a band from UK that was due to travel. Eva is happy to talk to anyone about that platform they are using.

Ruairi Ó'Donnabháin – Quarter Block Party

They were due to have a festival on Cape Clear Island in August. The move to digital doesn't work for them because most people don't have internet access. They've repurposed their grant to fund new commissions for artists. There is a digital divide and socio economic and geographical concerns. Then they have an annual festival in February that features live art. They are smaller working in a precarious landscape. They feel their role is to shift their focus from product to process. They're trying to show that in their next application to address the divide in inner city, geographic. Half of their programme is live music and there are issues with drinks sponsorship etc. They see a real poverty in digital content available. They're not interested in up skilling in that area. Their artists are emerging and mid-career and the material is not there. They see their role in the wider ecology to question the modes of production that's going on. They want to move towards slower modes of working rather than acceleratory. As an artist Ruairi participated in the CMF moments with an American artist that he found really interesting, valuable and illuminating.

Lorraine Maye - Cork Midsummer Festival

Cork Midsummer Festival delivered a live theatre piece Corca dorca in 16 communities, on greens which gave them a lot of new learning through the planning and working with the local communities.

Jennifer Ahern – Baboró Childrens International Arts Festival

Their audience is primarily children and is planned for October so they are still working it out. Digital doesn't work quite as well with children. They are hoping to have some zoom workshops. And they are planning to have two theatre performances. Schools are half of their audience and they won't come out. Their mission is to give children of all backgrounds and needs access. The Schools are open to artists coming in so they are hoping they can go in with smaller performances. They are also looking at radio plays which are old school but they are aware that not everyone has smart phones and wifi access so they want to make it more democratic. There are so many safety concerns, and they are concerned about attracting crowds if they do work outdoors.

Michael Carty – Tread softly

They are trying to organise a series of guided walks in the landscape within the health and safety guidelines. They are looking at maybe 10 families of 4 rather than 10 individuals at a time. It's interesting to listen to the conversation around virtual fatigue etc. They are a small emerging

festival so they have the agility that will hopefully be positive. They're trying to focus on outdoor and it will hopefully be successful.

Kate Kennelly – Kerry County Council

They delivered through Cruinniu na nÓg, and usually do physical events so it was big new learning. They had a bigger reach but they take the point of the socio economic issues. They got involved with a company called Digiwiz which is an online programme to build your own robot. 90 children registered and they got a kit sent out to them and then they went to an online workshop. They couldn't go through the schools so they used their WhatsApp parent groups. They had their Film maker in residence do a workshop online also which was more about process than product. They would like to do a mix of both in the future. They don't feel you can replace live but they definitely got children whose parents wouldn't have brought them to a live show. From a Local authority perspective with festivals it's been very mixed. Budgets will be very tight for next year. They want people to talk to government about supporting festivals as an integral part of life. They need the support from the top down. They are encouraging people to speak to their representatives and councillors and make it real for them. Tell them about your festival and your audience. What will define local authorities will be how they come out of this and festivals have such a positive way of doing that.

Brian Fleming – Big Bang Festival

They are hoping they can react by taking the opportunity to look at things they've never done before. Usually they bring in an expert from somewhere like Africa or India. They are not going to live stream concerts but they would like to go to Africa and record a ceremony taking place and put it up and have a question and answers session with the participants. Some of their workshops have included the elders of the tradition that have been documented with photography so they are looking to do interviews with them. The pandemic has given them a bit of geographical freedom. They can also have bigger names that they couldn't have afforded to fly in before. They plan to have live zoom lessons from California and West Africa. We expect interest from abroad. The festival is due to take place from 24 – 26 July but their workshops that normally take place beforehand will now take place in the real world at a later date with a facilitator from New York in September.

David Teevan – Theatre Forum have created a document for venues for reopening and it's available on their website. He also attended a Webinar in Tipperary County Council who had a Health and Safety Advisor. Maybe other arts officers need to look at this as a resource and work on how to give access to all to that knowledge.

Clonmel Junction Festival brought in an expert in a health and safety expert and set up their recording studio. They had a choice of planning outdoor work that could possibly be shut down or a mix of online and visual arts. The County Council were very supportive and gave them their full grant but they requested that they did not programme anything that congregated people.

Ella Daly – Limerick Literature Festival

Their festival isn't until next February so they just missed the pandemic. They are trying to plan for next year and one of their concerns is that their Audience is quite a bit older and cocooning. They may not want to travel. How can they work with their audience to teach and help to familiarise them with the internet in the coming months. How do they monetise that though? When they screened their theatre production last year they put up a donation box but they don't have confidence that doing that on a talk with an author will have the same response. Are other festivals putting paywalls on their content and if not do festivals just say in their future application that they expect a reduced box office.

Karl Wallace - the Arts council acknowledges the recovery will be slow. Festivals are essential to the recovery of the arts because of the opportunities they offer both the artist and the public. Applications submitted for the next round of Festival Investment funding needs to be, first and foremost feasible. It's important that festivals pursue their mission and strategies into the future but also have contingency planning in place. The Arts Council recognises that the festival business model may have to change in light of the Covid pandemic.

Emmet Condon – Another Love Story

They are a small lean organisation so the shock of resources being tight is not new to them. They have relied heavily on followers for donations. They had a small online weekender at the end of April and they did it through Facebook and Instagram and did well in their donations. They cancelled just last week for their August festival and are looking at an online version but if it's not free will they lose their viewership. Offering the programme for free is problematic. There was a sense of comradery during the pandemic but now festivals can't keep giving art away for free. Paywalls seem to be the only way to be supported to keep going.

Gemma Flanagan – Strokestown International Poetry Festival

Their festival is next May and they expect less audience. Their festival is an International poetry festival in County Roscommon. Their Readers are usually international. Their competition was already done and their winners were announced on Facebook. Looking back they feel they could have done it better but they are looking forward to next year at a hybrid festival with blended audiences.

Darragh Morgan – Chamber Music in Valentia

Darragh is also part of a Piano trio (Fidelio Trio) and lives in London and represents the Chamber Music Festival on Valentia here. They have seen the music industry collapse. They wanted to help artists to make money. They can't be on Valentia Island this year and as well as the support from the Arts Council they rely on box office. They are going entirely online and creating films this weekend with a full concert of Irish musicians not based in Ireland. It will be live content and they will do it 2 – 3 times over the next few weeks. It's important for them to make sure artists are paid and given the opportunity to meet. Monetisation is a huge issue. Darragh had done something with Philip Glass that got 15k views but in classical music you can't do that. He feels they need gently steer audiences not just to donate but to pay for tickets.

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?)

- In relation to Paywall issues is there an industry standard that we agree as a sector?
- How do we set the bar of sound quality?
- How can we facilitate that move properly so that audiences are getting the quality they deserve?
- Huge investment will be needed specifically in the music sector
- Learning curves are a challenge, and the limited access to internet in some areas.
- Levels of investment are not comparable to levels of investment in other countries for example Iceland.
- Templates for best practice
- There is a danger that everything looking the same.

Fiona Clark – Cork International Film Festival

It's an interesting time but one of key things as a festival is that they are so dependent on partners particularly venues. Creating a cinematic experience in venues is expensive. The venues they have a relationship with have a reduced capacity of 75% and trying to figure out how to make that work is very difficult. They are planning a physical and digital festival while retaining the ethos of a film festival. Trying to do that with the capacity reduction requires constant discussion around the economics of it and it's not clear what will happen yet. Content being available and the changing plans of distributors and the Film industry isn't necessarily supporting cinema which makes them stuck in the middle. It's challenging to negotiate. Where does income come from? Box office will be lower as well as sponsorship. Decisions are taking a lot longer than normal. There's still not enough information to know what November looks like. They launched a film club digitally on an integrated platform so they could have live questions and answers. They did this to test for moving the festival online and see what works and it will be their contingency plan.

Ciara Higgins – Great Music in Irish Houses Festival

It's difficult for classical musicians. There are iconic spaces for chamber music giving content for free. They are still planning to do something in November because it's their 50th birthday. They are looking at a blend of streaming and live and they're lucky they are partners with OPW. They are a roving festival in 8 or 9 venues but economically they have to weigh it up. They want festivals to remember that they are also audience members for different things and it's important to ask your local audiences would they pay for certain things. The production values are really important but the audience connection to them is important also

Comment – theatre forum have an indigo survey that asks audiences.

Mary Neyland – Gospel Rising Music Festival

They are a choral music festival and this year they had to cancel as their festival brings choirs together. They usually bring in facilitators to teach large choirs. Singing in large groups in small spaces is what they do and it's not possible at the moment. They feel there a lot of fatigue with zoom rehearsals. They were very difficult for choir directors to handle. They have a Directors forum in August to see how they've keep their choirs motivated. Most of the choirs are voluntary, so monetising that is very hard. The future of their festival is uncertain but they are planning on running next year with maybe smaller groups coming to the festival hopefully next May/June.

John McIntyre – Feile na Tana

Their festival is a traditional Irish festival from north county Louth. It includes Tuition, concerts, lectures, poetry, Irish language events. The challenges are how do we financially make it work and how do they make their application for next year. The festival takes place the 1st weekend in February. At this point they don't know what they can physically run. These meetings are enlightening and it's good to see everyone is having the same problems.

Comment: Key point is that these meetings are an opportunity for networking to meet and share.

David Teevan ended the meeting saying that it had been incredibly rich, and it was the Arts Councils job to gather intelligence and understanding so that they can plan for the future and respond accordingly. On behalf of the Arts Council he thanked Lorraine, and thanked everyone for taking the time to attend today.

END.