

Talking Festivals Live and Digital Minutes, Session 3

Festival Making in the face of COVID '19

Wednesday 1st 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	Dr David Teevan (Moderator)	Festival Advisor
Arts Council	Regina O'Shea	Festivals and Venues Officer
Cork Midsummer Festival	Lorraine Maye (Chair)	MDA
Crescent, A Festival of Irish Contemporary Music	Rebecca Warren	Music
Dublin Theatre Festival	Derval Mellett	Theatre
Summer Sing!	Sonya Keogh	Music

Cairde Sligo Arts Festival	Tara McGowan	MDA
Gap Arts Festival	Garrett Keogh	MDA
Arts and Disability Ireland	Pádraig Naughton	Arts Participation
Dance Festival of Irish Choreography	John Scott	Dance
Killaloe Chamber Music Festival	Trish Taylor Thompson	Music
Limerick Sings International Choral Festival	Emma Foote	Music
Murder One	Vanessa Fox O'Loughlin	Literature
Westival	Conor Wilson	MDA
Maureen Culleton Festival of Dance	Maureen Culleton	Traditional Arts
Dingle Literary Festival	Peter McKay	Literature
West Cork Literary Festival	Eimear O'Herlihy	Literature
Clonmel Applefest	Theresia Guschlbauer	MDA
Inishowen International Folk Song & Ballad Seminar	Grace Toland	Traditional Arts
Frank Harte Festival	Frank Nugent	Traditional Arts

National Circus Festival of Ireland	Con Horgan	Circus
Towers and Tales	Eimear Cheasty	Literature - YPCE
Wexford County Council	Liz Burns	Local Authority
Limerick City and County Council	Aoife Potter-Cogan	Local Authority

Minutes

David Teevan welcomed the participants and introduced himself.

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.

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 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 we 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.

ACTION: *The festivals policy will be published on the AC website in due course.*

Lorraine thanked David, Karl and the Arts Council for arranging this meeting. Today is about networking, exchanging issues and knowledge's. Lorraine's role is to facilitate and keep the meeting fluid. She asked that if anyone is speaking they give their name and the name of the festival they are from and to feel free to use the chat.

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?

Garrett Keogh – Gap Arts Festival

This festival were hoping not to go down the online route apart from their workshops and are interested in hearing other festivals ideas on alternatives.

Lorraine expressed concerns for festivals when there isn't a clear roadmap for them. For Cork Midsummer Festival they didn't know until May if they would be able to go ahead which was a challenge. They wanted to be artist led and asked their artists in residence to give them ideas on what would work for them. It allowed space for development and had interesting time frames.

Gap Arts Festival might like the idea putting on work that is in the development stage. It could be very interesting.

Eimear Cheasty - Towers and Tales Festival

This festival takes place on the May bank holiday weekend. They made a decision that it couldn't happen and moved to digital space. They are a small team and wanted to ensure they were happy with their plans and that they represented their programme. As the festival is a literature storytelling festival for children it moves to digital much easier than some other festivals. They used the lowest technology option they could. Authors were asked to pre-record their readings and they tied it in with launching their new website. All artists were paid. Artists that didn't want to do digital were offered to be part of a schools programme later in the year. Some authors gave them worksheets that could be downloaded before the workshops and there were high numbers. They are now planning for 2021. It will be very different post Covid and they have a lot of learning to do in the next 6 months.

Tara McGowan - Cairde Festival

Cairde Festival hasn't taken place yet but they are doing their pre-records now for the festival next week. This is a great opportunity to talk about new challenges. It's really important that festivals keep referring to their ethos. Cairde connect is now a 4 day online festival from the 8th – 11th July which some of the programme moved to the autumn. They are cautious but learning as they go. They are running a condensed programme but navigating online is hugely different and the technical aspects are different. Putting artists who are used to live audiences in front of a camera for an online recording is a very different experience for them. Cairde's programme will now all be pre-recorded except for the children's disco. They feel that if you are going to go online you need a director and you need to make sure you add in a lot more time for retakes. Also if you are putting something out live on Facebook/YouTube you need to leave your time running over so that you don't cut off the chat afterwards. It would be great to have a template of things to look out for. Tara also advised that festivals don't try to do everything.

Comment – There is so much learning to be done and there needs to be a way of festivals passing on ideas and information to each other.

John Scott – Dance Festival of Irish Choreography

This festival is currently taking place and it's quite surreal for John running it from his living room. It's a dance festival with 32 choreographers. Last year the festival took place in New York and Ireland. If things had been different they would have been in Project Arts Centre this week and New York in the autumn. They spoke to choreographers about doing short dance films which adhered to the social distancing guidelines. There are 3 programmes every night this week and a Ceili on Friday including a panel discussion on race and Irish identity. They tried not to just make dance films but to also dance. On Facebook live they had 1400 views and in New York they connected with a human rights website that reached audiences of 14K. If the festival had been live they would have had audiences of around 200. The videos on YouTube are archived but donations are small. Online has allowed them to connect with an audience in South America and Spain and so far it's been a positive experience. Next year they plan to have a mixture of live and online.

Emma Foote - Limerick sings

This festival was due to take place at the beginning of June. They were due to have choirs from Europe and the States but due to Covid they decided they had to cancel. Their workshops with Anuna have moved online and they are fully subscribed. They worked well and it's something they will explore further for next year.

Sonya Keogh – Summer Sing!

This festival is currently filming for their festival. Usually they would have 150 children performing together in City Hall. The idea is that children travel, but this year they had to decide to cancel and pay cancellation fees to staff or look at online events. They took time to think about it and rather than all sing together online they wanted to do something different that they would be interested in doing and something positive. They have all recorded in different places even some in a shed with duvets and it was mixed by their New York partners and they are very proud and excited about it. They are also going to be running a number of webinars. They have to evolve and this has given them an opportunity to be more inclusive than ever before and they've seen full households taking place. The geography has spread and it's no longer just a Cork event. You can be anywhere. Next year they will hold a virtual space also. Their reach has expanded and it's been an enlightening experience and humbling. Things that should have been easy brought unseen challenges but they have met them.

Comment – there is an incredible amount of positivity. These are voluntary festivals that not only have to unpack a planned festival but also have to rebuild a new programme at the same time.

Trish Taylor Thompson – Killaloe Chamber Music Festival

This festival was live in the cathedral in the past. Katherine Hunka has just been announced as their new Artistic Director. They really like the idea of asking the artists what they would like to do and they would have great confidence in their artists. Their audience are an older demographic that love chamber music. They have a lovely balance and are looking at what they want to take from this into next year. They have plans to approach the Catholic Church in Ballina which would allow them the possibility of having the same size audience. They are embracing the pop up and expanding within the community. They will have a mixture live and online and they have to adapt. Its baby steps going forward but they feel that their ethos is intact.

Aoife Potter Cogan – Arts Officer in Limerick City and County Council.

Aoife congratulated Lorraine and her team on a fabulous programme that was put together for Cork Midsummer festival. It struck a very good balance. From the local authorities perspective there is a fear that there will be overdependence around digital content. It is highly commendable that festivals have managed to adapt in this way but festivals have an intrinsic power in their physicality. It's not always about how many people go. Festivals broaden

communities while supporting tourism by animating areas. There needs to be a question of how to move forward in that space.

Eimear – Waterford Writers weekend

This festival is due to take place in October. They are looking at what the audience will see. Currently their venue Garter Lane only has a capacity of 20 with social distancing in place, financially how do you make that viable. How do you recreate the buzz of an audience of 180. How do you work with your artists? They have a poet who will do a series of workshops called 'This is Waterford' and it will end in a performance. At the moment they have to wait and see but are trying to programme positively but are also aware of a possible second wave of Covid in October.

Con Horgan – National Circus Festival

This festival takes place in Tralee, Co Kerry. Con is also an artist and performer with Fanzini Brothers. The festival is due to take place in November. At the start of the year they felt they had the space to do it but as time has progressed it's become difficult to plan. This meeting is great to hear shared experiences and help each other. The Circus festival is a live show that takes place in a lot of different places including Siamsa Tire, the church and outdoors. Initially they felt that the online interaction would be quite cold and not great value for artists, and they had concerns around the huge saturation of it. But listening to others he is seeing value in it and it's interesting to hear there's an audience for it that maybe wasn't appreciated before. They have run a lot of workshops at a circus convention that could work well online and allow them to have international high end tutors. They are considering spreading their programme through the year. They do have a concern for November that the main venue won't be open and how could they make the festival viable. There are concerns around the cost of putting Covid safety measures in place and they're hoping to team up with the county council. Usually a circus show has a start, middle and end and they are now looking at Spraoi for examples. They are looking at longer show times showing multiple times a day. This would open opportunities for live performances. If someone attends and it's too crowded they can move on to another one and come back to that one when it's repeated later on. It's challenging artists to work in a new way.

Teresa Guschlbauer – Clonmel Applefest

This festival is currently looking at the arguments around digital versus live and it's a bit like content versus experience. Their festival is about contact, surprise, choreographed civic space that you can't recreate online. Last year they had art trails and now they have a recorded element to try and keep that. They are trying to mix content and experience. How do you make

an online event an experience? Festivals give people unexpected encounters and in smaller towns festivals have a responsibility to do that. They are looking to do mostly live, outdoors and spread staggered timings but they aren't sure yet. Anything less than attempting to do live wouldn't be right for Clonmel. Sights, sounds and smell are so important.

Frank Nugent – Frank Harte Festival

This festival is in an urban area which is unusual for a festival based on historical singing. They are great believers of telling our history through song. They usually have singing tours in places like Killmainham and Arbour hill. This year they are taking the opportunity to go to places they wouldn't have before. They are planning an option A and B so that if they can have a live event they will make it that it can be streamed at the same time. Their Friday night session has become an international zoom session. The experience they have gained has been amazing. The Festival is usually 3 or 4 sessions in small rooms so the plan now is to do the sessions in big hall instead. They usually have the Grand Concert in the Teacher's Club main hall and the ITMA record it for their archives. They are planning on live streaming their lecture and workshops. As they couldn't invite their overseas guests they invited Karen Casey from Waterford instead. So their intention is to keep the festival as live as possible with live streaming. It's not the same but it's the best they can do.

Comment David Teevan – It's a lot of work for small voluntary groups to move a festival online. There is a lot of demand financially and in learning. The Arts Council is looking at festivals and how they need support but they also want festivals to be true to their mission and they may not mean online for everyone.

Maureen Culleton – Maureen Culleton Festival of Dance

This is an 8 day festival that takes place in Laois. It is core traditional dance and includes 5 ceilithe. In most set dancing are close to your partner and also 6 other people. This is just not possible with social distancing. There are also questions around insurance. A big part of their festival would also include the social cup of tea and their core is togetherness. This festival had to cancel this year and it's left a huge void. There are 10 people in the ceili band which was another huge problem. Looking forward to next year they are still unsure what will happen but they need good health and lots of advice to try to rethink the festival so that it can take place.

Comment – There is a lot to be said for taking time to reflect on what's right for your festival and not just rushing out to do something.

Liz Burns – Wexford County Council Arts Officer

Wexford County Council has a festival strategy that they want to develop. They currently fund 11 small festivals and 7 of them are going ahead in reimagined ways. The other chose not to. Liz is here today to listen from a local authority perspective and she is getting feedback from a large amount of businesses that they want festivals back. Hybrid seems to be the way to go but it does create a sense of loss. They are funding artists to commission work in order to pay them. It is great to have shared learning in a format like this meeting. The county council are currently looking at ways to reimagine culture night on the 18th September. There won't be an open call this year but they are looking at pop ups, drive ins etc, there is a lot of learning but they are keen to progress it.

Conor Wilson – Westival

This festival is looking towards their local community for programming now. It will be a combination of live and streamed events. They have the advantage of watching everyone before them to see best practice. They did feel that print has been left out a bit and they are going to do something in that format. They won't be able to have as people they'd hoped for in audience numbers but they feel that some audiences are zoomed out and they want to find ways to pay artists. They are planning Visual Art trails, poetry and hopefully a live performance in October along with a minimal amount of Street arts.

Pádraig Naughton – Arts and Disability Ireland

Arts and Disability Ireland work with a number of organisations to make performances accessible. As things have moved online a lot have lost their accessibility. Border and distance have come down but it hasn't improved accessibility issues. Arts and Disability Ireland are looking at running workshops for subtitling videos. Programme notes for audio on the 14th and 28th July and you can find information on the Arts and Disability website.

Peter McKay – Dingle Literary Festival

Their festival is not until November and they are planning mainly online but some authors live in Dublin and they are hoping they can put on one live performance in one venue. They are also looking at having a signer for this event and will contact Arts and Disability Ireland for further information on it.

Lorraine ended the meeting by saying that there is always value in not doing things as well and that sometimes that is ok. It's important to give festivals the opportunity to spend time together so that they can share their learnings and issues. Her advice would be to stay as flexible as possible

David Teevan thanked everyone for coming to today's meeting and thanked Lorraine for facilitating.

END.