

Talking Festivals International Webinar

Planning in the Face of Uncertainty - Minutes

Thursday 2nd July 2020

14.00 – 17.00

Planning in the face of uncertainty reaches beyond the national borders to bring together the international community of festival makers and artists that create and present work in a festival context to work together to share/pool a collective experience of dealing with festival making in 2020, and begin to imagine how festivals can plan with confidence for 2021. It is our ambition that emerging from this three-hour digital workshop will be a wealth of **ideas, responses and actions** that are required to support this sector's survival.

In attendance

Contributor	Organisation
Ahmed Al Attar	D-Caf Festival/ Orient Productions (Egypt)
Aislinn O hEocha	Baboró International Children's Arts Festival (Ireland)
Anne Clarke	Landmark Production Theatre (Ireland)
Antonia Kuzmanić	Circostrada (France)
Aoife Tunney (Minutes)	Creative Europe Desk, Arts Council, Ireland
Bek Berger (MDA)	Artist/ Producer (Germany)
Benjamin Perchet	Dublin Dance Festival (Ireland)
Camille Lynch (Minutes)	Festival and Venues Assistant, Arts Council, Ireland
Ciara O'Dowd	Arts Council, Ireland
Dani Fecko	Fascinator Management (Canada)

David McLoughlin	Wexford Festival Opera (Ireland)
Dr Abigail Gilmore	University of Manchester (UK)
Dr Ali Fitzgibbon	Queens University Belfast (UK)
Dr David Teevan	Festival Advisor to the Arts Council, Ireland
Dr Maria O'Brien	Dublin City University (Ireland)
Dr Niamh Nic Ghabhann	University of Limerick (Ireland)
Dr Sarah Feinstein	University of Leeds (UK)
Elaine McGague	Loosysmokes (Ireland)
Felicia Olusanya	Artist (Ireland)
Gary Keegan	Broken Talkers (Ireland)
Gavin Stride	Farnham Maltings and Caravan (UK)
Gintare Masteikaite	Lithuanian Dance Information Center/ Baltic Moves Dance Festival (Lithuania)
Imed Alibi	Carthage Music Days (Tunisia)
Iva Hovart	Art Republic (Spain)
Jenna Hall	Belfast Community Circus School, Premiere Circus and Festival of Fools (UK)
Jerome Devaud	Kamchtka Street Theatre Collective (Spain)
Jiv Parasram	Rumble Theatre (Canada)
Jo Mangan	Carlow Arts Festival (Ireland)
John Scott	Irish Modern Dance Theatre (Ireland)

Josa Kölbl	Berlin Circus Festival (Germany)
Karl Wallace	Head of Festivals, Arts Council, Ireland
Katie Lowry (Minutes)	Creative Europe Desk, Arts Council, Ireland
Liz Meaney	Senior Director, Performing Arts, Arts Council, Ireland
Luca Ricci	Kilowatt (Italy)
Lucy Medlycott	Irish Street Arts, Circus and Spectacle Network (Ireland)
Maggie Clarke	Xtrax/Without Walls (UK)
Mary Wycherley	Light Moves Festival of Screendance (Ireland)
Maureen Kennelly	Director, Arts Council, Ireland
Mia Gallagher	Artist (Ireland)
Monica Corcoran	Strategic Development Department, Arts Council, Ireland
Nick McDowell	Arts Council England (UK)
Nora Hickey M'Sichili	Centre Culture Irlandais, Paris
Paul Brown	Earagail Arts Festival (Ireland)
Paul Fahy	Galway International Arts Festival (Ireland)
Peter Power	Sparsile Collective and Eat My Noise (Ireland)
Regina O Shea (Minutes)	Festival and Venues Officer, Arts Council, Ireland
Sandra LaRonde	Red Sky Performance (Canada)
Santi Rovira	Kamchátka Street Theatre Collective (Spain)
Sepehr Sharifzadeh	Reconnect Performance Festival (Iran)

Seth Honnor	Kaleider (UK)
Tara Brandel	Artist (Ireland)
Tara McGowan	Cairde Sligo Arts Festival (Ireland)
TV Honan	Spraoui International Street Arts Festival (Ireland)
Victoria O'Brien	Dance Advisor to the Arts Council, Ireland
Vida Bren	Ljud Circus Collective (Slovenia)

AGENDA

Introductions

14.00: Welcome and general introduction from Karl Wallace (Head of Festivals, Arts Council of Ireland)

14.10: Welcome from Maureen Kennelly (Director, Arts Council of Ireland)

14.15: Introduction to webinar from Dr. David Teevan (Festival Advisor, Arts Council of Ireland)

Guest Speakers

14.25: Jo Mangan - Artist/Festival Director (Carlow Arts Festival – Ireland)

14.33: Gintare Masteikaite - Culture manager, producer of the performing arts (Baltic Moves Dance Festival – Lithuania)

14.41: Maggie Clarke - Director (Xtrax/Without Walls - UK)

14.48: Ahmed El Attar - Artist/Festival Director (D-Caf – Egypt)

14.56: Dani Fecko - Theatre Producer and Touring Agent (Fascinators Management – Canada)

Workshop

15.00 -16.30: Breakout groups

The gathering will be split into four groups. Each group will look at two themes. All delegates are invited to participate in the breakout groups.

1. Building on the accounts we have heard from the guest speakers, each delegate will share something of the challenges they have faced in 2020, their stories of survival, stabilisation and recovery.
2. This will be followed by an open discussion about how we as artists and arts managers can plan for the future in the face of uncertainty.

Final Thoughts

16.30 – 17.00: Reportage and conclusion

Each group will have designated a reporter to provide an outline of some of their group discussion and offer a number of actions that they believe are necessary to ensure the survival of the festival ecology into the future.

Minutes

Karl Wallace introduced himself and welcomed everyone. He thanked them for taking part in the webinar today. Over the last eight weeks the Arts Council has been conducting webinars with the Irish festival sector partly as a platform to encourage skill sharing and information but also for the Arts Council to gather intelligence and better understand how to tailor any supports in the future. So far over 100 festivals have shared their challenges in mounting programmes and often repurposing programmes for 2020. Their insights have informed the structure of this workshop today and the subsequent provocations.

Ireland has a very rich and diverse festival ecology and funds just under 170 festivals of differing scales, geographies and artistic content. They are all at different stages of development, some just a few years old enabling opportunities to attract new diverse audiences and others more established producing larger international programmes opportunities for artist development and commissions. It would be fair to say that festivals in Ireland have also been responsible for spearheading art form development and social change in their communities.

Arts festival programmes have become a central spine of the arts infrastructure in Ireland producing opportunities for artists to experiment, showcase and critically an opportunity for audiences to experiment and curate their own lived experiences and histories.

Right now, approximately one third of Irish funded festivals have cancelled their 2020 programmes and the remainder are repurposing and revising their content for digital or some type of new live programme or a hybrid of these. What occurs as a common theme so far is that adaptability is the key; just how to do that is the tricky question.

Following these discussions, it is clear that artists are central and key to the reimagining of festival programmes and festivals spaces and that is why this webinar is taking place bring artists and festivals together from both Ireland and beyond, to not only share learning but to understand better what the challenges are moving forward and how to prepare for them in an uncertain future.

David Teevan introduced himself and explained that different jurisdictions have different issues. He also noted that not all arts communities have access to public funding. The pandemic is the reason for this meeting and festivals play a special role in connecting artists in this difficult time. As a former festival maker of Clonmel Junction Festival for 15 years he understands the challenges. It's a socially engaged practice that has a multitude of relationships. It's a local and global practice. Since March this year the landscape has changed with festivals having to 'unbuild' and rebuild programmes. The pandemic has also closed borders. This plays into the hands of regressive, social constraints. The closing of borders has broken down international partners and developing co-productions. This was a theme of our other meetings. The grief they had to manage when dismantling programmes, online challenges, technical knowledge deficit and the damage to volunteers and financial constraints. There is a need to reach out beyond borders and share experiences. The central theme is the 3rd phase and the reconfiguration. There is no more certainty but we can try and begin to rebuild the process with post Covid vibrant festivals.

The idea of today is inviting 55 experts into the room to have a participatory event. We have invited a number of speakers from different countries representative of the diversity of delegates attending the webinar.

Jo Mangan - Carlow Arts Festival

The main focus of today is practical as Carlow Arts Festival is trying to figure out their 2021 festival. They had to cancel their festival that was due to take place in June. They also had to very quickly reimagine their programme. Jo thanked the Arts Council for not putting pressure on them. Being creators, they wanted to try things out. They learned a huge amount. They also spread it out instead of having a squashed programme. None of the artists they had programmed for June could pivot to online. So, they started to look at local work that could go online. The programme needed to be reflective of what they would usually do, which includes having a focus on circus/street arts and participatory work. A lot of people don't have the attention and focus is difficult in these times. That's why they decided a series of events with a number of broadcasts in fewer than five minutes. They are happy they did it and they have a massive document of technical learning if anyone wants to have it shared. On the day of broadcast the technician's house was hit by lightning and then Youtube settings changed so they started late but their audience stuck with them. All the digital platforms are working against each other to get people's attention. They've had between 7k or 8k views. How do you measure the depth of that; no one knows. They delved into digital and also created a piece for work with Peter Power and Leanne Butler collaboration with Cork Midsummer Festival). They are going to have a physical exhibition in Carlow and Virtual reality cinema in people's homes. They are interested in what other people are doing. On a positive note their audience spread was to 70 countries and going forward they would be interested in doing a mix of live and online.

Comment: Festivals that came earlier in Covid had different challenges and part of this meeting is to look at the future and the idea of hybrid festivals are coming up a lot.

Maureen Kennelly – Director of Arts Council

Maureen thanked everyone for taking part. When the lockdown hit Maureen's 1st thought was for festivals. Knowing the energy that goes into making festivals takes such particular care and is such an important platform for artists and it's an enormous thing to be taken away. Many major productions couldn't happen also and it's such a loss for audiences. Maureen has admired how festivals have engaged with their audiences and reached out to their public. There are some opportunities within it and she wanted to thank the festival for their forbearance, ingenuity and brevity, and thanks to the international colleagues. It will be complex over the next year.

Gintare Masteikaite - Baltic Moves Dance Festival (Lithuania)

Gintare is experienced in working with a contemporary circus and dance festival. The first was in May and was a Baltic contemporary dance festival. Their first idea was not to go online because there was too much already. They wanted to do something different so they didn't cancel. After 2 or 3 weeks in April they postponed to November/ December and started conversations with international artists. They realised they couldn't bring some artists and couldn't find venues so they moved some of the programme to May 2021. However, the situation in Lithuania has been very good and now they can do performances with up to 1000 people outside. They didn't want to lose their connection with their audiences so they are looking at July/ Aug performance. They are working on safety measures. They want to include international artists who have works in progress that were created during the pandemic. So, they have 2 festivals now and then have second dates later in the year in case they have a second wave. This will premiere national companies in late autumn. They can't announce their programme yet or open their box office yet but they feel they have to be bold and brave. They want to try to keep it as an event and people want it. The August festival main artists were supposed to come from Brussels, Ireland and UK but international programme funding has been cancelled. So, they postponed this work and did an open call for companies from Lithuania, Estonia and Poland as they can drive so there are no plane ticket costs. They are going to announce in a week or two. Its 4 days of an international festival with new opera, circus, dance, theatre and music with lots of question marks. 99% of the programme will be outdoor so that people can move around. In 2021 they plan to have less international artists but the ones they invite keep them longer for maybe 2 or 3 shows. This would save money and give the audience time to get to know them better. Budgets are reduced and it's better for our climate change.

David Teevan – Longer residencies and working in a closer geographical area feels likely to be taken up.

Maggie Clark – Xtract/ Without Walls

They specialise in supporting the creation and touring of community street arts and circus organisation with and for festivals. They also manage 35 festivals and organisations. They have supported 200 shows of many scales and genres. Their programme was due to be announced just

before the lockdown. Many of their festivals are in economically deprived parts of country. They also showcase work from UK for festivals in Europe and Asia. All of that has been cancelled because of the disruption to travel looks quite precarious. They spent time cancelling and reorganising their activities and working with their funders and local authorities. In the UK there is a lot of bad news, a roadmap was announced for reopening of venues but there were no dates. Venues have been closed indefinitely and this is catastrophic. There is no rescue package so far. Aside from doing things digitally not all of their outdoor festivals have been cancelled. They are looking at the social distancing guidelines and they are talking to other festivals to put together a recovery programme as the lockdown lifts. They have to adapt to make outdoor events safe for audiences as well as staff. There are no published guidelines and they are working to put together some case studies. Key challenge is around artists working together through Zoom, and it's a big commitment. Organisations are looking at different locations and using ticketing even if free to control numbers. They are also looking at art in homes and communities, like in square and balconies. This work can lift spirits especially as the virus is not hitting all areas equally. Some Local authorities want events as part of the recovery. Beyond this year the situation is unclear. If venues are not able to do Christmas shows they won't have their income to continue and people are anxious about confirming contracts. Festivals had to pay out cancellation fees for 2020. 2021 they need some projects to go ahead. The International work is hugely problematic. This Virus is coming on top of Brexit. The arts are a resourceful sector.

David Teevan – there are hard facts that have to be dealt with as well as resources.

Achmed Al Attar – D-Caf Festival/ Orient Productions (Egypt)

They had to cancel their festival that was due to take place from the 20th March – 10th April. They programme Arab artists and invite 100 programmers interested in new contemporary works. They were 1 week away from the festival when they had to cancel and had some losses but were able to contain some damage. It's postponed to mid-October. The perspective from this side of the world is very different, as artist, festivals and people. Egypt did not go into lockdown, they imposed a curfew. People were out all day and worked through but for the majority of population 98% of 150 million people the choice was to take a chance with COVID or die from hunger. There is no social welfare, no government backing, and no salvage package. They are on their own. The lockdown means a lot of hardship for a lot people. 50 million people went under the poverty line. There is now hysteria about a second wave. The unilateral decision of locking the world down has to be discussed. People are suffering and economies are down. The arts sector in Egypt has no support. All artists and technicians, whether freelance or salaried have no salary. Theatres can reopen with 25% of theatre audience, so they are not reopening. 50 million people died in 2018 from TB and the world has a 10-year plan to bring that number down to half. The difference between that and Covid is that TB is cured in Western democracies. No one asked for a lockdown. Fear is an everyday tool of submission in this country. Make people afraid means they can be controlled. In D-Caf they run a theatre, studio spaces, office space and they feel obliged to try and do something. They are supporting staff by paying them a salary of a monthly stipend, also their technicians. How do we pay artists online? They

would love to go back to some sort of normal, to try and salvage what is left because if it continues for another year it will collapse. But their Team are safe and so they feel privileged.

David Teevan – It is central to our thinking to recognise that we have extraordinary privilege in Ireland with arts funding. It's is salutary to hear of the situation in Egypt.

Dani Fecko – Fascinator Management (Canada)

Dani is from Vancouver, recognised her being on stolen lands of First Nations peoples. She feels a large amount of privilege in the place she's found herself in life. Covid 19 had quite large numbers in Canada and there are different levels of coming out of lockdown, between 2 and 3 phases across the country. They have neighbours to the south of them (USA) who are not handling the situation very well and it is worrying that they share a border with them. It seems unfair that there is a cultural revolution happening right now because a few months ago a group of white people realised racism was a problem. This is happening in union with Covid because it's allowing people space to examine. Their festival is called Evolver and it had to be cancelled and put an open call out to artists to make something for digital. Before a musician played a song once and were paid, but now they have to be filmmakers and editors, and usually for smaller amounts of money. They are using the 3 Horizon frameworks: Present, Emergence and the Near Future. The future is uncertain but it always is. When you think about it you are thinking what from the present and emerging that we want to leave behind. As art workers weekends are good to have now. What are the access points? Who is it harder for? It's much more challenging. Festivals are thinking about context, community and content, community over content, response to artists and their community. Digital is a tool to create analogue experiences. We use this tool to connect and to encourage people to connect to each other and their experiences.

Synopsis of breakout group 1¹

Chair	Dr. Maria O'Brien
Minutes	Camille Lynch
Participants:	
John Scott	Irish Modern Dance Theatre
Anne Clarke	Landmark Production Theatre
TV Honan	Spraoi International Street Arts Festival
Benjamin Perchet	Dublin Dance Festival

¹ The synopsis of breakout group 1 was based on minutes taken by Camille Lynch

Jerome Devaud Kamchtka Street Theatre Collective
Gavin Stride Farnham Maltings and Caravan
Lucy Medlycott Irish Street Arts, Circus and Spectacle Network
Nora Hickey M'Sichili Centre Culture Irlandais, Paris
Monica Corcoran Strategic Development Department in the Arts Council

A central theme of this breakout group was the importance of the live intimate communal experiences that are at the heart of festivals. Some of the contributors spoke about how they had attempted to recreate this using digital platforms, one noting that they did not make a digital festival but made a festival “using technology”, another spoke of using zoom to deliver bespoke concerts using forty breakout rooms with a different performer in each room. For other festivals the digital was not an option, choosing instead to postpone and/or rework their programmes. In these instances the flexibility of festivals to work in non-arts spaces and the public realm was cited as a positive benefit. These organisations spoke of the need for clear guidelines around issues of public safety as being urgently needed.

In terms of planning for 2021 there were significant concerns expressed around funding, particularly for organisations that relied on sponsorship for part of their budget. Festivals and production companies were also adopting scenario planning and modelling of different avenues into their strategizing, in an attempt to be prepared for a wide breath of possible futures, with several festivals noting their belief that festival programmes are likely to blend digital and live in their future programmes.

While difficulties around working internationally were expressed avenues to work around this reality were discussed, which included one UK organisation working with international ambassadors in other jurisdictions, who were contracted to seek out additional work opportunities for artists travelling to those country in order to maximise the benefit of the travel.

Artist’s extraordinary ability to adapt to changing realities was applauded, as was the determination of all stakeholders in the festival sector to embracing the challenges to get through this time of uncertainty.

Synopsis of breakout group 2²

² The synopsis of breakout group 2 was based on minutes taken by Katie Lowry and notes provided by rapporteur Peter Powers.

Chair	Dr Ali Fitzgibbon
Minutes	Katie Lowry
Participants:	
Peter Power	Freelance artist, Ireland
Elaine McGague	Freelance artist and S&CA maker with Loosysmokes, Ireland
TV Honan	Spraoi International Street Arts Festival, Ireland
David McLoughlin	Wexford Opera Festival, Ireland
Dani Fecko	Fascinator Management, Canada
Bek Berger (MDA)	Artist/Producer, Germany
Seth Honnor	Kaleider, UK
Ahmed Al Attar	D-Caf Festival/Orient Productions, Egypt
Josa Kölbel	Berlin Circus Festival, Germany
Dr Sarah Feinstein	University of Leeds, UK

Central to the discussion in this group was the existential nature of festivals as events “existing in a space time that’s outside reality, where we test and make up rules for a duration”, as was their “function as rupturing agents”. While the Covid pandemic is forcing change in respect of travel and how work is made and presented, it was agreed that these core values must be retained. The lockdown has also precipitated a re-evaluation of space and a heightening of the importance of the “locality” of events and arts practices.

The group discussed the need and opportunity arising from the lockdown to challenge the operational models and ideological positions that are dominant in the arts.

While recognising the opportunities for change, the “deep damage gouged into the potential to plan” and “the ground up disarray that it has caused” was highlighted. In this respect it was noted that risk, while essential to arts practice, was not equal, however, it was agreed that it must be engaged with and efforts must be made to understand and address systemic imbalance. In this respect the gift of time afforded during this period did offer the opportunity to re-evaluate and reassess. The issue of climate change was also to the fore.

Among this group it was noted that artists and festival makers had continued to create, and where possible present work. The move to digital platforms was perceived as having both positives and negatives. It was recognised that the digital turn had a democratising impact in taking the arts out of theatres and art centres that were forbidding spaces to some and reaching new demographics.

Synopsis of breakout group 3³

Chair Dr Niamh Nic Ghabhann

Minutes Aoife Tunney

Participants:

Gary Keegan Freelance artist and theatre maker with Brokentalkers, Ireland

Mia Gallagher Freelance artist, Ireland

Jo Mangan Carlow Arts Festival, Ireland

Aislinn O hEocha Baboró International Arts Festival for Children, Ireland

Jiv Parasram Rumble Theatre, Canada

Iva Hovart Art Republic, Spain

Nick McDowell Arts Council England, UK

Santi Rovira Kamchátka Street Theatre Collective, Spain

Ciara O'Dowd Arts Council, Ireland

Karl Wallace Arts Council, Ireland

The discussion in breakout group 3 had a philosophical tone. Several of the delegates spoke of the value of having time to rethink things. Ideas about “slow work” and work practices where the artist is embedded in communities were presented. Another delegate spoke of their commitment to doing less travel and inviting international artists to engage in residencies rather than flying visits to perform. The confluence of the Black Live Matters campaign and issues surrounding climate change were also discussed with delegates expressing their commitment to infuse these ideas into the coordinates of future work practices. It was however recognised that desire for change, “to leave things behind” was in tension with the desire among many people “to go back to the way things were”. Nonetheless, it was felt that the Covid pandemic provided the opportunity to “remodel the contract between the artist and society”. The positive mood of the discussion was reflected in one artists commitment to meeting “the challenge to make work that can practically work within restrictions”.

Some concerns were also expressed. There was a deep worry about the impact the pandemic had had on children, and while it was felt that the arts could play an important role in helping young people process these issues, there were significant challenges facing organisations that have a commitment to working with children due to restrictions. The vulnerability of arts service professionals, freelance arts workers and small business dependent on the arts was also highlighted.

³ The synopsis of breakout group 3 was based on minutes taken by Aoife Tunney and notes provided by rapporteur Mia Gallagher.

There was also much concern that the unique relationships that occurs through festivals - between artists and other artists and between artists and the public - are under threat.

Synopsis of breakout group 4⁴

Chair Dr Abigail Gilmore

Minutes Regina O'Shea

Participants:

Mary Wycherley Freelance artist and festival maker with Lightmoves Festival, Ireland

Felicia Olusanya Freelance artist, Ireland

Paul Fahy Galway International Arts Festival, Ireland

Jenna Hall Belfast Community Circus School, Circus & Festival of Fools, UK

Maggie Clark Xtrax/Without Walls, UK

Vida Bren Ljud Circus Collective, Slovenia

Gintare Masteikaite Lithuanian Dance Information Center/New Baltic Dance, Lithuania

Luca Ricci Kilowatt, Italy

Antonia Kuzmanic Circostrada, France

Sepehr Sharifzadeh Reconnect Performance Festival

Victoria O'Brien Arts Council, Ireland

A number of the delegates expressed their appreciation that the Covid lockdown had forced them to slow down. This had personal benefits, but also affected their professional practice, whether as individual artists or in the context of those working in organisations, as it afforded the opportunity to "reassess what value is". The curtailment of travel had also been welcomed in some cases for reasons of climate change, but also in terms of quality of life. The pivot to online and the benefits and challenges this brought were discussed; with festivals explaining their decision to use digital platforms or not, the different uses that festivals made of digital platforms, and the global reach of the medium being among the common themes presented.

Among the primary concerns festivals expressed was the fear of losing local audiences they had spent years developing, damage to the arts infrastructure that was integral to festivals being able to present work, and the challenges around presenting international work and working collaboratively

^{4 4} The synopsis of breakout group 4 was based on minutes taken by Regina O Shea

with international colleagues to create new work, both of which were central to the core values of many festivals. Practical issues with regard to planning for the future around which greater clarity was needed include insurance and contracts.

Overall however there was the belief that festivals “had provided a glimmer of hope for artists and the public in an otherwise very depressing landscape”.

All 4 breakout groups joined back in the main room and gave an overview of the discussions that took place in the breakout rooms (notes above).

Karl Wallace thanked everyone for attending today and it has been an incredibly rich conversation. This is the beginning of the discussion and hopefully there will be on-going conversations that lead from it. There was never going to be solutions to all the questions in the 3 hours but it is great to have the sharing experience. He would like to carry on this conversation and is happy to support festival development if they can help. The International arts structure wraps around small and large festivals that are essential. Those things will be fed back to the Arts Council.

David Teevan thanked the international colleagues for getting up early or staying up late, the arts council minute takers. All the minutes will be disseminated to the group. It's the knowledge gathering that's so important so that our funding and policy is based on reality and not perceptions.

END.