

PLACES MATTER

An Arts Council / Local Government
Conference arising from the
Framework for Collaboration
agreement

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Bailey Allen Hall, NUI Galway

BUILDING INCLUSION IN THE ARTS

Ronit Lentin, Chair

Thank you very much, Sindy, that was a most amazing and apt introduction. I'm really delighted to have been asked to moderate this day and I hope it will be very productive.

A couple of weeks ago I attended a show called Mr Robinson, a show about the life and work of the African American singer, actor and activist Paul Robinson. In the programme notes he writes that the very first Shakespearian play in Ireland was Othello in 1662, but only 1831 was a role played by the black actor, a very famous African American actor Ira Aldridge. But until then and since then actors have been blacked out for Othello.

A black man, who travelled the world, sold into slavery and ended up a commander in the Venetian military, Othello was a superbly accomplished immigrant, despite being racialised as a black other, just as Shakespeare's Shylock was racialised as a Jewish other.

Like Othello he had done the State some service, as he says in the play. In today's Ireland we have many artists who despite being seen as racialised, disabled and gay, are doing the State a huge service. And this is what we are celebrating here today.

However, celebrating the contribution by racialised, non-able-bodied, non-cisgendered artists is not enough. When I was asked to moderate this day, the talk was about diversity and inclusion, and I applaud the Arts Council and local government for the wish to be more inclusive. However the word that has not been mentioned so far is the R word: racism.

In view of the prevalence of racism and its total denial in Irish society and in other western societies (everybody is not a racist, but ...) and in mourning for the most recent victims of terrorist crimes the Muslim worshippers in Christchurch New Zealand and the peaceful Palestinian marchers at the Gaza border fence, congratulating ourselves for being attentive to diversity is not the end of the road. Perhaps it's the beginning.

As a migrant myself, I was born in Palestine, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, where I grew up as a privileged Jewish citizen with a huge advantage over my Palestinian colleagues, the owners of the land, whose lands and homes we colonised and appropriated. I came to Ireland almost 50 years ago and became a member of the racialised Jewish minority. These two facts and understanding the racialisation by my own people of the colonised Palestinians has turned me into the anti-racist activist that I am now.

We have a wealth of talent here today, people will perform and talk to us, artists teach us a

lot about celebrated diversity and difference, but they can also teach us about race and racialisation.

Because racism you know, and Orlaith mentioned some of it, has not arrived in Ireland only when "these people" came. Despite having been Europe's first settled colony and despite Irish people having been racialised and humiliated, and the diaspora, Irish people managed to become white in the US, in Australia, and in Britain. They also imported racial differences and racism back into Ireland. I have done a lot of work on that over the years.

Racism definitely exists in Ireland. Prior to the advent of the large scale migration in the 1990s, there was always racism against Ireland's largest indigenous racial minority, the Travellers, and I call them racial minority not ethnic minority - ethnicity is one of these things that was invented in order not to use the word racism. There was always anti-black racism, because black people existed here long before African people immigrated to Ireland recently.

There was also anti-Jewish racism and I am sure you all know neutral Ireland accepted only 60 Jewish refugees during the Nazi era. The anti-migrant racism- and you know the asylum seekers who started arriving after the 1990s were Ireland's 'refugee problem', instead of welcoming the fact that Ireland became wealthy and a desired destination - and to this day they are hidden from public view in the appalling direct provision centres, again as Sindy said, places do matter.

Just as Travellers were deprived of proper accommodation and therefore not seen, as Sindy so eloquently said, and just as later migrants performed a vital role in the labour market, they face a multitude of restrictions. I echo Sindy's words about reports and strategic plans, we have loads of them, Travellers know, they have had so many plans and so many promises.

So without taking away from this wonderful initiative by the Arts Council and local government, what I would expect us to do here today is first of all acknowledge the huge contribution to Ireland's cultural life by racialised and migrant people. Secondly, this is my main hope for today, I'd like us to interrogate ourselves as to what extent white settled and Christian Irish people are enabling artists and audiences from racialised backgrounds, or serving as their gatekeepers?

I would like us to think together (and we have conversation times throughout the day); who funds, curates, organises and facilitates or blocks the access to artists from racialised backgrounds? To what extent we allow them to speak to us in different and often uncomfortable voices? It's not about the participation of artists but those who organise the arts. This is what I would like us to think about.

I was listening on the radio to fears expressed by Ireland's Muslim community after the

Christchurch massacre. Today I would like us to begin an important, though highly uncomfortable and difficult conversation. I believe that producers, venue and festival managers, local authority arts officers, curators, gallery owners and museum directors need to think carefully how to broaden the scope and bridge the gaps.

And to do that they may have to move aside, they may have to make room for people of racialised backgrounds to be the organisers and curators, managers and so on. But you see Othello was not merely a hugely accomplished migrant who despite exiled slavery and humiliation, managed to rise to the top, but also one of the most prominent characters of English drama, a foreigner turned a classic.

And a performance we have here today, exiles, immigrants and racialised members of society, some very young artists, have the potential of turning from today's foreigners into tomorrow's classics, who auger Ireland's future.

I'm particularly concerned about State and systemic racism, individual racism is a problem but it's not the main problem, the main problem is State racism and systemic racism, against Travellers, Muslim and black Irish people, against migrants and asylum seekers. I am delighted with Cindy's opening address, and I am glad that we'll hear a contribution from people such as Rosaleen McDonagh who is a Traveller playwright and activist, African theatre practitioner Kunle Animashaun and Vukasin Nedeljković whose work on the direct provision system is echoed, in a project included in your programmes, so have a look. This is to mention just a few of the contributors.

So the day is structured around three keynote presentations by Nina Simon, Abid Hussain and Prof William Schabas and then two panels by artists and art organisers into which we'll have conversation between you to discuss among yourselves what you will witness and what you will do about it.

In addition we'll have performances throughout the day by young artists and basically what I hope is nobody leaves this place unchallenged, and I wish us all a fruitful and thought-provoking, perhaps disturbing day!

The first keynote speaker is Nina Simon, she was called a visionary, named Santa Cruz woman of the year for her innovative leadership. She is the executive director of the Museum of Art & History and founder of OF/BY/FOR ALL movement. Please welcome Nina Simon.

[APPLAUSE]