

# PLACES MATTER

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

27 and 28 March 2019  
Bailey Allen Hall, NUI Galway

BUILDING INCLUSION IN THE ARTS

## William Schabas

Thank you so much. That was quite a beginning for an afternoon talk! I was very nervous to see a dark room after a nice comfortable lunch, and you know what happens so typically at the afternoon session... I was at a lecture about two weeks ago, where somebody fell asleep in the afternoon session and started to snore very audibly! And it was disrupting the whole business and the speaker turned to the person next to him and said 'give him a shove and wake him up'. And the guy shot back, 'you put him to sleep, you wake him up'! (laughter)

Well I am going to talk about some serious things this afternoon and I am going to start where I always start when I'm talking about human rights, which is with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this marvellous document adopted 70 years and three months ago, that still speaks to us as vividly as when it was written and adopted in Paris in December of 1948.

You have been talking a lot about diversity, about discrimination and of course the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has a very eloquent answer to that, I don't think you need me here to speak about that. But there's a provision in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that's not as well known that speaks about the arts. It's tucked away at the tail end, there are 30 articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and this is in Article 27. I'm going to read you the first sentence:

**Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.**

Now that provision, as I say, is tucked away at the end, almost at the vanishing point of the rights and it has been neglected over the years. When it's been paid attention to, the emphasis has been on the cultural life of the community and also on the protection of traditional cultures, of ancestral cultures and so on.

That marvellous phrase 'to enjoy the arts' has tended to be overlooked altogether. I looked through my extensive library on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to try and find someone who had actually spoken to the phrase. Somewhat to my astonishment the best text that I found on the subject of enjoying the arts as a human right is in a publication by Amnesty International Ireland in 2008 on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Amnesty invited 30 Irish personalities to contribute chapters, each one of them to write on one of the articles in the Universal Declaration and they asked Theo Dorgan, a poet and writer, and I believe a former member of the Irish Arts Council, to write on the subject. I couldn't read the whole thing but I'll just share one paragraph of Theo's text with you:

**Many governments seem quite prepared to inhibit the practice and enjoyment of the arts through a strategy of neglect. This is not necessarily and not always from malice, at least not from active malice. It's simply that today a great number of people are drawn to the exercise of government who have themselves little interest or education in the arts and simply do not understand human consequences of failing to provide for the arts. Furthermore and worse, many governments do not show any sign of understanding that they are in power with a responsibility to provide for our life in the arts- just as they are in power to provide for those other social goods we value and cherish.**

One of my favourite writers is the Harvard psychology professor, public intellectual Steven Pinker and Pinker has a new book out called 'Enlightenment Now'. He's been in the papers a lot because he is on a book tour talking about it, and Pinker demonstrates how so many of these social goods have improved dramatically in recent decades. He points to, for example, declines in violence, increases in literacy, increases in health and so on. But Pinker too neglects the arts, he neglects the contributions they make, he has a paragraph in the entire book where he talks about how we will have more time to enjoy the arts, and he does it in a very indistinctive kind of way.

I wasn't able to be with you here yesterday evening or this morning because when I was asked to give this the talk and I checked my diary and I had bought opera tickets in London for last night and I wasn't going to sacrifice them, so it was agreed that I'd speak in the afternoon. My wife and I got on the underground and went to the opera in central London in Covent Garden, and we were in this wonderfully diverse environment of an underground car in one of the increasingly great cities of the world with the diversity they manifest so often. Women with head scarves, men with turbans, people of colour, a multitude of languages being spoken. We got out of the underground and walked into the opera hall and it didn't look the same! Not by a long shot! In fact over the years I don't think I've ever seen a woman with a head scarf in the opera, or a man with a turban, and very, very few people of colour in the opera.

Now people address that and try and explain it and wonder how we can confront that and make the arts more diverse and maybe the idea is that maybe we can make it appeal to a broader public. There are different theories about it- one is that it's too expensive- and I am inclined to discount that, because of course there are lots of people of colour and lots of women with head scarves and men with turbans who have the resources to go and buy opera tickets, they just don't go anyway, they go somewhere else.

And there are lots of people of modest means who are prepared to spend large sums of money to go to a sporting event or a popular music event or something like that, but they won't spend it going to the opera. Then some might also say, well, the problem is actually because it's about topics that are irrelevant to them, and well last night - I don't know if you know the Merry Widow by Franz Lehar- but it's true, it's a comic opera about European aristocrats and it doesn't really say much to our lives today.

But it was the same thing six months ago when I was at the English National Opera to see Porgy and Bess, some of you have probably seen it though it doesn't get performed in Ireland very often. It was written by the Gershwins and it's the story of an African American community in the south dealing with all the problems that they

confronted historically and still confront today, problems of criminality, of racist police, of drugs, of migration to the north. It's a controversial opera because it's sometimes felt to be a patronising account, it reflects the time it was written which was the 1930s, but James Baldwin the great African American writer was very fond of the opera and I want to say that most of the black musicians, certainly singers, are very fond of the opera for another reason; not because of the story it tells, but because it gives them work. And that's because George and Ira Gershwin insisted in their will and in the copyright of the opera that it be performed by a black cast. I think there's an exception, there are two cops that come in at one point in the opera, and you can guess that they're not black.

The opera has been performed only once and very recently by a non-black cast, and that was a provocative effort by the opera company of Hungary last year, you can read about this on the internet. They were trying to make a point about the opera.

The idea that it creates work for people reminds us that the arts are not just - I mentioned Stephen Pinker and he looks at the contribution of the arts only from those who receive the arts, the people who sit in the audience or walk through the galleries and so on- but it's also so much about the creators, about those who create the arts and my own opinion is that that is one of the great obstacles, that's why to a large extent that we don't have the diversity in the opera hall going into it, because we don't have the diversity coming up of young artists who can get the training that they require, and who can see that there are careers ahead of them.

I lived here in Galway for about 11 years, when I was director of the Irish Centre for Human Rights, and my partner and I became very close friends with a ConTempo Quartet, one of Ireland's great musical ensembles. My wife was actually on the board that recruited them - we had agreed here at the university that the university would fund, with the help of the local arts authority, a musical ensemble, an edition from around the world, and we got four young Romanian string musicians and they moved here and are still here, they live out in Connemara and they are well known throughout the island and internationally.

But they weren't trained here, they were trained in Romania, and it's a fact that countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with all of the problems that they have had historically, were nevertheless a little better than we were at training people in the arts. And it was possible in those countries, certainly at the time when the ConTempo Quartet were being trained, for young people to actually contemplate a career, get the training that they needed and find a way to earn a living and see that that was possible. I think until we solve that problem we're not going to solve the problem of getting more diversity into the opera hall as well.

I mentioned James Baldwin as well, some of you will have seen the recent film *If Beale Street Could Talk* which is based upon one of Baldwin's later novels, and in there he tells the story of a young black man in New York City, in an urban environment, in Harlem, who is a creator. He's a sculptor, he creates wood sculptures, and that's part of the wonderful sympathetic story about a young man who is framed by the police and ends up going to jail for a crime that he didn't commit, a familiar story for black Americans.

In the materials for this session, for this conference, there is reference of course to diversity but also to migration and migration has changed Ireland in the last few decades, it's changed Europe in recent decades, it's changing the world. But people say now that something like a quarter of a billion people in the world live in a country other than their country of birth, and I believe that that's only going to increase.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has something to say about migration, but it's not adequate. It's an inchoate text, it's an imperfect, incomplete right. On the one hand, as I said, Article 27 talks about enjoying the arts; Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights talks about human mobility, everyone has freedom of movement, but it's limited.

Human rights are often limited but they're generally limited where the rights and freedoms of others bump into them and where we have to limit them because we

have to respect considerations that derive from the rights and freedoms of others. But that's not the case with freedom of movement in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It's limited to freedom of movement within the country, the right of people to enter and to leave and to return to their own country. And in my view it's an inadequate provision; the principle, the right of freedom of movement should be global, and we should have the right to move freely throughout the planet, increasingly we have this. We have experiments with it on a regional level like the European Union, but the EU has its external border as well and in recent years, because of the incomplete package of law, has become a graveyard for migrants coming from Africa and Asia, doing nothing worse than trying to exercise their own right to asylum and protection from persecution.

I can't resist saying a word or two about the attack on freedom of movement within the European Union, the attack that is manifested in Brexit. I live in London and I have witnessed this whole terrible business of Brexit. We hear the politicians reminding us that the solution has to respect the will of the people as expressed in a referendum, and in that referendum of 2016 I'm sure that there were many people who voted to leave the European Union for legitimate concerns that do require being addressed. But that was a referendum that was fuelled by racism and by xenophobia and I have no doubt that if that element had been absent from the campaign the forces to remain in the EU would have prevailed in the referendum. So to hear that Brexit is justified out of a spirit of democracy to respect the will of the people is really a perverse statement and it's founded on a fatally flawed expression of democracy that was that referendum.

I mentioned Article 13 of the Universal Declaration and freedom of movement and how imperfect that is, because it only applies to the borders of the country. The future is to see that element removed. I mentioned Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that recognises the right of everyone to enjoy the arts and I've spoken about how there are two dimensions to that, those who enjoy it from a passive sense and those who enjoy it creating the arts, as a creators.

I want to tie those two ideas together, because I think that the most effective, one of the effective mechanisms or methods we have of dealing with the challenges to migration that do bubble up into terrible expressions like the British Brexit referendum, is through the arts. The marvellous things about the arts is that they have a universal dimension and I explained how the Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has often emphasised the historic traditional cultures and I'm not criticising that or challenging that, except we should recognise that a focus on that dimension turns us a little bit inward, and we look to our own people and to our roots and our ancestry rather than looking outward.

And the beauty of the arts - and I've seen it here in the time I have been here today, seen performers from the different parts of the world – is that it turns us towards the universal, to the idea that we have more in common with people around the world, even if they have different backgrounds, different origins and their skin is a different colour and they may practice a different religion or no religion at all.

So I think that this is the message that I would like to leave you with; that the arts have a contribution to make, not only do they have to confront with and deal with the diversity of our changing population - which is going to continue to change and in only one direction - but we also have to use the arts as a way of addressing these concerns.

All around the world people cherish things like the wood-cuts of the Japanese Hokusai, the installations of Ai Weiwei, the music of Mozart, the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, WB Yeats. Thank you.