

Róise Goan reflects on

Festivals and Collaborative Practice



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IN 2011, THE ARTS COUNCIL TOOK A BOLD STEP IN INITIATING A CONVERSATION WITH A NUMBER OF FESTIVALS NATIONALLY AROUND THE OBSERVED INTEREST AND GROWING INTERNATIONAL TREND TOWARDS THE PRESENTATION OF PROJECTS ROOTED IN ARTS AND HEALTH PRACTICE AT FESTIVALS.

At the time I was the director of Dublin Fringe Festival, and having demonstrated a commitment to Participatory practice, I was fortunate to be consulted as part of the Arts Council initiative and to attend a meeting hosted by The Arts Council's Festivals and Arts Participation teams. The attending festivals were Dublin Fringe Festival, Dublin Puppet Festival, Iniscealtra Festival of Arts, Cork Midsummer Festival, Cairde, Phizzfest, Bealtaine, Clifden Arts Festival, and Clonmel Junction Festival - quite a varied mix of scales, models and practices, but sharing a common interest in actively engaging audiences as participants in arts practice. For the period 2011-12, The Arts Council offered a development fund of €10,000 to see if interesting participatory arts/health projects might be developed, to which the attending festivals were invited to apply.***

Three projects were developed through this award by Cork Midsummer Festival, Phizzfest and Clonmel Junction Festival. Cork Midsummer Festival worked with artist Mark Storer, people with disabilities, their family members and carers on a project that explored sexual health. Phizzfest worked with artists Laragh Pittman and Ciara McMahon to research and develop ideas for creative arts screening in general medical practice. Clonmel Junction Festival worked with artists Brigid Teehan and Lyn Mather to develop links with staff and service users in the HSE (South Tipperary) Mental Health Service. Rather than review the learning from each project, which would not be possible in an article of this length, I would like to focus on what various conversations and meetings around this small but strategic fund highlighted to me in terms of our duty of care to artists and participants from a festival perspective, and the challenges and opportunities facing festivals who wish to embark on collaborative arts projects in health and other contexts.

Festivals and collaborative/participatory art projects, while often attracted to each other do not necessarily make the most comfortable bedfellows. The attraction is perhaps seeded in shared objectives of place-making, community-building, and the marking of time. In making festivals, we take calculated risks to contain chaos within rigid parameters. Explained more simply, come rain, hail or shine: the dates are fixed and the show must go on. In participatory practice, however, rigid deadlines and short lead-ins are not necessarily conducive to producing quality work, potentially creating additional pressure for artists, particularly if the participants are new to collaborative arts practice or are drawn from groups where physical or mental health determines that a greater level of flexibility is required. Festivals find it very hard to be flexible in their structure and yet their capacity to occupy new and unusual physical spaces offers a boon to participatory practice, in their ability to sit comfortably outside the arts centre, or indeed community, education or healthcare setting. Perhaps trickiest of all is the void that envelops all activity at the end of the festival – the audience disappears, the team disbands quickly with an exhausted one or two left behind to pick up the pieces and realign them for next year. The somewhat crude analogy of climbing a mountain only to discover a sheer cliff drop on the other side is fitting – there are usually no mechanisms in place to protect the participants we have rallied to the top with huge momentum from falling over the edge. During my time at Dublin Fringe Festival, when taking on the production of participatory projects, usually with international artists, I was always keen to have a special projects producer in place to ensure that when the train

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took off, all our participants were on board and looked after. Delivering this additional support proved time and time again to be the most important resource in ensuring the project's successful delivery.

What this timely initiative from The Arts Council threw into sharp relief for me was how difficult it is for festivals to engage in long-term development projects, particularly with potentially vulnerable participants, alongside the annual festival-making cycle, not to mention the exhaustive annual funding cycle. At a certain moment in time every year, the festival will kick into a high gear, and the projects not yet ready to accelerate alongside it get left behind, albeit with a stated commitment to pick it up for the following year, but nine times out of ten in my experience those projects never come to fruition. Why is that? Perhaps the momentum required to push the project through is lost. After a festival cycle, the festival emerges changed; its priorities shift and its on to the next thing. Festival staff change, and with it, fortunes vary wildly from year to year, often dictating what will be possible in the coming year.

Challenges notwithstanding, there has never been greater interest in collaborative arts practice, either within festivals both nationally and internationally. The area of health, in particular, is of interest as a thematic participatory practice within festivals. One need only look to the variety of excellent projects presented in festivals nationally or to the growing strength of First Fortnight in Dublin as evidence. Indeed in Brighton, UK, a new festival initiated by The Basement's Artistic Director Helen Medland, titled *SICK!* has emerged in the last two years, with an exciting programme of contemporary theatre, dance, music, debate, spoken word and participation, all about physical and mental health.

I asked Medland why she took Health as a thematic for a new annual contemporary performance festival – a very bold but perhaps inflexible (down the line) choice. Her response was two-fold – she wanted to curate a new dynamic programme that had a thematic urgency and relevance as well as formal innovation, but more tellingly she wanted to redesign her audience and create a new, two-way reciprocal relationship with them. Everybody, she says is touched by a problematic relationship with health, whether their own or a loved one's. Her programming choices allowed her to access specialists and experts, organised groups and communities, but furthermore, an independent audience who flocked to see the work because they wanted to see and talk about their health. She was excited about the diversity of that audience, in terms of age, ethnicity and experience. All performances at *SICK!* are wrapped in a discursive programme and Medland reports that a minimum of 60% stayed post-show to engage and discuss after each performance. (*SICK!* is funded by The Wellcome Trust as well as Arts Council England, who are also funding arts and health projects in Ireland, most recently Willfredd Theatre's *CARE*.) We can await with anticipation fresh developments with new initiatives coming onstream. *Well*, is a new festival with a focus on arts and wellbeing. The festival is a joint initiative by Waterford Healing Arts Trust and Garter Lane Arts Centre and is based in Waterford. It began in 2013 and will run for a week each October, incorporating World Mental Health Day. The festival aims to explore and celebrate the health and wellbeing benefits of participation in the arts for each individual and the wider community.

To conclude, The Arts Council's recognition of the special approaches necessary when Festival directors programme participatory art practice is something that should be lauded, as we continue to seek the best models with which to nurture and encourage exciting collaborative projects in festivals, artistic works which in turn inspire and build new audiences for the arts.

Róise Goan was director of Dublin Fringe Festival, 2008-2013; she blogs at goangetstough.tumblr.com

*** The Arts Council Festivals Arts and Health Research and Development Award

IN SHORT... WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

We were delighted to welcome 140+ artists to our Networking Day curated by Michelle Browne, planning is underway for the 2014 event, hosted a sold-out workshop with Blast Theory...we have been working with Jesse Jones and Black Church Print Studios on the final phase of **The Prosperity Project**; Europe is on our minds at the moment visiting partners in **Holland, Hungary, Spain, Germany, Turkey, Romania and the UK**. We have collaborated with 7 partners on a bid to **Creative Europe** initiating a Collaborative Arts Partnership - Create is also working with the Design & Crafts Council of Ireland and other European partners on a multi partner project on recovery and the arts.

Create managed the **First Round of the Artist in the Community Scheme for 2014**; and this year's Learning Development Programme with a new cohort of students...in line with Create's remit to create opportunities in collaborative arts and to encourage **public art with a participatory aspect**, Create is delighted to be working with the Office of Public Works on various commission opportunities through 2014.

COMING UP... Claire Doherty, Director of Situations, Create and National Sculpture Factory will host a **Public Art Seminar** in Cork this July, and we are working with Dublin City Council on a special **Artist Showcase** as part of the Liverpool Biennale 2014 this October.

New Benefits with Membership of Create

Members can now avail of reduced cost insurance); apply for a health plan from HSF; a discount on health insurance from Aviva; a range of discounts at arts venues around the country; access to short term 'hot desks' in the Create office at Curved Street.

Full details at www.create-ireland.ie



create national development
agency for collaborative arts

WELCOME TO CREATE NEWS

This is the sixteenth edition of Create News. Create News is published twice yearly in May and October and with one extra digital edition.

It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer and offers the latest information on Create events and services.

If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie.

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MOVING CONVERSATIONS

A discussion on collaborative dance curated by Create

In partnership with Dublin Dance Festival & RUA RED

When: 21st May

Where: RUA RED, Tallaght, Co. Dublin

Time: 2.30 – 6.00

Create is working with Dublin Dance Festival to explore the ideas and inspiration behind work featured in the DDF2014 programme, particularly those with a collaborative focus. This afternoon event will include a viewing of WITHOUT, the seven screen installation by choreographer and artist Rosemary Lee, a keynote presentation by Rosemary and a panel discussion on collaborative dance, participation and engagement.

Panel: Chaired by Dylan Tighe (theatre maker & musician) Rosemary Lee (choreographer and artist); Ríonach Ní Néill (choreographer and dancer); Steve Batts (choreographer and artistic director, Echo Echo Dance)

The very concept of collaborative or participatory dance subverts received ideas about authorship and what constitutes excellence. What does it demand of the professionally trained dancer to work collaboratively with communities or non-dancers? Can the professional and non-professional merge to produce a distinct alternative aesthetic? Does labelling a work 'community dance' immediately alter the way the work might be received? In what ways can collaboration offer an opportunity to make dance more visible and accessible, within communities unaccustomed to engaging with this particular artform? Can participatory dance encourage public dance access, and change minds about who gets to make dance and where?

The panel will explore and discuss these and other related questions from the point of view of the work they have created, the processes involved and their learnings from the collaborative experience.

There will also be an opportunity to hear about the Arts Council Artist in the Community Scheme Bursary Award 2014: Collaborative Dance

Arts Council Artist in the Community Scheme

Bursary Award 2014: Collaborative Dance

The Arts Council Artist in the Community Scheme Bursary Award 2014: Collaborative Dance aims to support individual professional dance artists working in the area of collaborative dance, or with groups of non-dancers. This is the fifth year that the Arts Council has provided a €10,000 bursary award as part of the Artist in the Community Scheme, which is managed by Create. This year for the first time the focus will be artform specific as opposed as focusing on a social or community context. It is expected that the successful applicant will share the learning arising from the Bursary with the wider dance community and collaborative arts sector. Create will work in partnership with Dance Ireland in providing information sessions and on the selection process. The deadline for the Award will be in October. Full information on how to apply will be available on Create & Dance Ireland websites in August.

Cork Ignite commission – Simon McKeown 19 September, Culture Night Cork 2014

Create and National Sculpture Factory Cork are delighted to announce their partnership on the Cork Ignite commission by internationally renowned artist Simon McKeown. Simon will realise an ambitious new artwork as part of Culture Night Cork 2014. McKeown will connect with members of the disability community in Cork, through Cope Foundation and SoundOut in the creation of one of his renowned outdoor public artworks. The live event on Culture Night will utilise a mix of exciting modern technologies, as the artist and his collaborators explore 'representation of difference' in relation to public space.

Simon was commissioned as part of the Ignite programme from a partnership initiative from Arts & Disability Ireland, plus Arts Council and Cork City Council; Galway City and County Councils, and Mayo County Council.

McKeown wowed audiences for the Cultural Olympiad in 2012 with his work Motion Disabled - featuring and inspired by the unique movements of disabled athletes and Paralympians – and The Last Thalidomide, a 10 metre high gigantic installation, an Unlimited commission for the Cultural Olympiad.

Artist in the Community Scheme First Round 2014 Research and Development Award

Artist; Community / Context; Artform; Location.

Sergiu Mircea Prunteanu; Roma community / arts & cultural diversity; music; Dublin. **Martina O'Brien;** Dudders Anglers Club / community of interest; visual arts; Dublin. **Sarah Ruttle;** Cork University Hospital / arts & cultural diversity; visual arts; Cork. **Seamus Nolan;** Upstate Theatre / community of interest; visual art; Louth. **Tomasz Madajczak;** Spirit of Sign / arts & disability; visual art; Cork. **Marie Brett & John McHarg;** Camden Fort Meagher / community of interest; visual art; Cork. **Caroline Campbell;** LGBT community / community of interest; film; Dublin. **Sean Millar;** SHINE / arts & disability; music; Dublin. **Dónal Ó Céilleachair;** Ionad Cultúrtha / community of interest; film; Muskerry Gaeltacht, Cork.

Artist; Community / Context; Artform; Location (Mentor)

Monica Flynn; Open Circle Community arts group / community of interest; visual arts; Kilkenny (Ailbhe Murphy).

Padraig Cunningham; Roscommon Solstice Choir / community of interest; film; Roscommon (Aideen Barry)

Project Realisation

Community; Artist; Project title; Context; Artform; Location

St Brendans Care Centre; Sarah Fuller; arts and older people; visual art; Galway

Knocktallon Ramblers; Marilyn Lennon; Waymakers Mapping Beyond Borders; community of interest; visual arts; Monaghan

Rialto Youth Project; Fiona Whelan; 'How To be A Woman' / community of interest visual art; Dublin

Panel

Feidlim Cannon, theatremaker, Brokentalkers; Liz Burns, Fire Station Artist's Studios & visual arts curator; Maeve Dineen, Cork City Arts Office, Observers: Eimear Harte, Arts Participation Officer, Arts Council; Hazel Dixon, Create.

