

ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

DRAFT 2

Statement from the Abbey Theatre to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Wednesday 30th January 2019
(submitted Tuesday 29th January)



Dr. Frances Ruane
Chairperson, the Abbey Theatre

Mr. Neil Murray
Co-Director, the Abbey Theatre

Dr Ruane: Thank you Chair, TDs and Senators.

On behalf of the Abbey Theatre, we welcome this opportunity to engage with your Committee today on the topic of the **current model of production, presenting and co-presenting in the Abbey Theatre.**

Introduction / Context

We understand that the origins of this invitation rest in the open letter to the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan TD, and published by The Irish Times on the 8th January.

On receiving a copy of the letter, the Abbey Theatre established a line of contact with the 312 signatories, and I am pleased to report to you that arrangements are in train to meet with their representatives. The planned dialogue, with a broad representation from the signatories, has been widely welcomed as the most appropriate way forward. Our first meeting is scheduled this Friday, and I very much hope that it will establish pathways for a productive dialogue.

For this reason, we are concentrating our engagement with the Committee today on the specific areas you have invited us to address. We do not wish to pre-empt, or create pre-conditions for what - we hope - will be a constructive and direct conversation on Friday, and beyond.

For the purpose of this presentation, I will now brief Members on the Abbey's history, our current governance and our strategy. My colleague, and Co-Director of the Abbey, Neil Murray, will address the more specific details in relation to our approach to production.

History and Governance

In 1904, WB Yeats and Lady Gregory established the Abbey Theatre with the stated manifesto "to bring upon the stage the deeper emotions of Ireland". That remains a cornerstone of how we operate today.

In 1925, the Abbey became the first state-subsidised theatre in the English-speaking world. With that State support, the Theatre has fostered great playwriting and great theatre making, with the production of many memorable plays in the 90+ years since.

In 2008, a new governance was put in place, with a Memorandum of Association agreed with the Government and the Arts Council, establishing the Abbey as a company limited by guarantee. Its recurrent funding comes through a grant from the Arts Council, acting at arm's length from the Department. Given the scale of the funding received, and the Abbey's role as a national cultural institution, the Theatre operates in full compliance with all of the legislation overseeing those in receipt of significant financial assistance from government.

The Memorandum of Association establishes the key elements in the Abbey's responsibilities as a national theatre, such as promoting the performance of dramatic arts to the highest standards; producing and co-producing plays; commissioning plays; and promoting appreciation of drama.

In 2014, an independent review of the Abbey Theatre was commissioned by the Arts Council and conducted by international experts (Bonnar Keenlyside). It recommended a re-prioritisation of the Theatre's activities, to address a lack of touring and of community and education work, the under-involvement of visiting companies, and the under-utilisation of the Peacock Theatre as a space for artistic experimentation.

In the period since, the Abbey has implemented the review's recommendations. In July 2015, the Board appointed Neil Murray and Graham McLaren as its Co-Directors, effective from July 2016, with ownership of the programme from January 2017. They were given a clear mandate to increase the activity levels of the Abbey, while maintaining financial sustainability.

In November 2015, the publication of the Abbey's 2016 programme gave rise to the #WakingTheFeminists movement, because of its lack of gender balance. The new Directors were asked by the Board to prioritise improving this balance as quickly as possible.

Board Strategy

Following my appointment as Chair in May 2017, the Executive and the Board undertook a strategic review process, culminating in our five-year strategy which has been circulated to you. It was informed by the Bonnar Keenlyside Report and feedback from the Arts Council, as well as:

- I. developments in theatre internationally – for example, organisation of ‘new work’ departments as the engine of creative outputs.
- II. the government’s strong ambition for, and commitment to, the creative arts.
- III. a desire to build young and diverse audiences across the whole country.
- IV. the requirement to be financially sustainable.

Our new strategy compels us to move forward in a spirit of collaboration, making our national theatre *a theatre for all*. At its heart is a robust commitment to artists, to the art form and to audiences, throughout the country and internationally. The strategy is driven by our core values of excellence, inclusivity, diversity and equality. And I would like to point out, gender equality continues to be prioritised.

From my perspective as Chair of the Board of the Abbey, I have observed some very important achievements in the past two years under the directorship of Neil and Graham. These include:

- the exceptional progress in increasing gender balance;
- the greater activity levels in the Peacock;
- the presentation of new and overlooked voices on our stages;
- the increased numbers and changing profile of our audiences;
- the challenging social issues brought onto the stage; and
- the maintenance of our annual expenditure at less than our annual income.

Challenges

But in celebrating all of these achievements and their benefits, we also recognise that the significant changes in these first two years have had some unintended consequences. In the past four months, these unintended consequences have been under very active discussion by the Arts Council and the Abbey Theatre.

As recent Theatre Forum research illustrates, the working lives of artists are precarious, and making a decent living as a freelancer is very hard. To make theatre, an openness to criticism as much as creativity is required. The Abbey regrets that some within our artistic community feel our journey towards a more collaborative national theatre has contributed to their hardship. We commit to engaging more with them, and to do - what we can - as the National Theatre to address their concerns and show leadership in strengthening and enriching Ireland’s theatre sector. I hope that we can use the opportunity of Friday’s meeting to commence a constructive dialogue to this end.

Mr. Murray: Thank you Frances. Chair, TDs and Senators,

The approach adopted by the Abbey from 2017 onwards, in line with a strategy agreed with the Abbey Board, has been to develop a national theatre that is artist led and audience focussed. We believe our National Theatre should be a people's theatre at the heart of Ireland's civic and social life. A theatre for all, regardless of where in the country you live or the amount of money in your pocket.

Central to the history and legacy of the Abbey Theatre is its role as a producing theatre. This continues to be at the heart of our activity. 2018, for example, featured acclaimed productions of Marina Carr's ***On Raftery's Hill*** and ***Come On Home*** by Phillip McMahon, and the run of ***Jimmy's Hall*** features amongst the best attended shows in the Abbey's history.

Alongside producing its own work, the Abbey Theatre has always co-produced and presented work. In 2016, for example, David Ireland's ***Cyprus Avenue*** was co-produced with the Royal Court Theatre London, and Frank McGuinness's ***Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*** was co-produced with Headlong Theatre, Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse and Glasgow Citizens Theatre.

The Programme

We believe in a national theatre that can also be a resource for the nation's theatre companies and makers. This has led to an increase in the number of co-productions and presentations whilst retaining the Abbey's identity as a major producing theatre. The impact of opening the Abbey Theatre up to other companies and artists, while welcomed by many, and which was an important part of the transition process, did have the consequence of reducing the number of self-produced shows across 2017 and 2018. We do acknowledge that some have been disadvantaged by that decision, while recognising that others, who had previously struggled to find a home at the Abbey, have benefited.

The 2019 programme includes more self-produced work, while retaining the principle of an open, collaborative programme. There will be seven Abbey Theatre self-produced shows on the Abbey Stage, of which three will tour in Ireland, the US and the UK. Our self-produced work will be on the Abbey Stage for 31 weeks in 2019, with co-produced work occupying 14 weeks and presented work occupying five weeks. A further two weeks are reserved for essential maintenance.

In 2019, the smaller Peacock Stage – in the past, dark for sustained periods – will have a full programme of work. This includes development periods for new shows and initiatives such as the Abbey's **5x5** programme, whereby under-represented communities are given the funding and space to work on the Peacock Stage for a week. It also includes the **Young Curators** programme – a season of work for young people selected by young people, as well as small-scale presentations by innovative, independent Irish companies and artists. Through these initiatives, we believe we can help unearth the new voices of Ireland and in turn, welcome new, diverse audiences. Could the next Synge, O'Casey or Carr be currently living in direct provision? We will never know if we don't open our doors to them.

This approach allows both Abbey and Peacock stages to operate all year round. The three-year average of 49 productions in 2017-2019, compares with the corresponding average of 36 for 2014-2016. Audiences are responding positively to this approach. Our attendances are continuing to grow and they reached 127,500 at the Abbey Theatre in 2018, the highest since 2010. For 56% of that audience, this was their first time at the Abbey. We believe in a national theatre where our artists are allowed to fail, but must be celebrated when they succeed.

Our programme adjustment has led to a significant improvement in gender equality on the Abbey's stages, which like the other main Irish stages have had a pronounced gender imbalance. As well as the Abbey's self-produced programme investing directly in female talent, our invitation to independent companies (in whose work we have invested), to present on the Abbey stages, has contributed to the speed at which we have been able to improve gender balance and bring greater variety to our audiences. Many independent companies are led by women who are creating innovative and exciting new work which merits being on our national stages.

Against this positive outlook for the Theatre, we take very seriously the concerns raised by some in the theatre community, particularly around opportunities for Irish and Irish-based artists being directly employed by the Abbey.

So let me give you a picture for 2019. Our **Self-Produced programme** will directly employ 85 actors over a total of 775 actor weeks. Of those 85 actors, the vast majority will be Irish and, predominantly, Irish-based. A further 66 Irish or Irish-based actors will be employed through co-production over a total of 342 actor weeks.

Furthermore, through In-Association, Presentation, Readings and Workshop agreements, we estimate that some 120 actors will engage in paid employment with the Abbey in 2019.

Now let me address the concerns expressed in relation to the potential underpayment for artists working at the Abbey, under the **Co-Production, In-Association and Presentation** contracts issued by the partner theatre company. In relation to co-productions, we have been in discussion with the Arts Council on this matter in recent months. We have agreed to ensure that all future contracts will include a condition that any artist engaged in a co-production with the Abbey will be paid at the appropriate Abbey rate or higher.

The issue of the Abbey determining pay rates for other companies, presenting work at the Abbey, is legally complex and we would like to see this issue form part of the planned dialogue with our theatre colleagues. We believe the Abbey Theatre should always be a fair-minded employer and collaborator, whilst providing a good return for substantial public investment.

We believe our programmes balance artistic ambition with financial prudence, support artistic development and diversity, while encouraging ever larger audiences to visit the Abbey Theatre. We welcome this opportunity to engage in positive dialogue with our colleagues from the Irish theatre sector and the Arts Council, to ensure, that our collective focus on making and presenting great theatre, in ways that are fair to artists and attractive to audiences, is at the heart of all we do.

End