

CENTRAL ARTS

HOW TO PROTECT AND PROMOTE A VIBRANT NIGHTLIFE, ECONOMY AND CULTURE IN OUR MAJOR CITIES.

INTRODUCTION

Having been asked to present to you here today and not wanting to speak from my own experience in isolation; I initially reached out to some select colleagues in the arts and entertainment industry to get some of their thoughts and ideas on the current state of Irish nightlife.

As a business owner, I am entrenched in making my business work and until recently didn't have the time to stop and look beyond my own patch to see how are nighttime culture is doing, and dishearteningly it appears the answer is not well.

Worryingly, all that I spoke to reported finding it increasingly difficult if not impossible to do business, with many talking about exit strategies.

Those I contacted were by-in-large people like me, who want to provide some alternative to mainstream nightlife, who are passionate about what they do and who understand that night-time culture needs to offer a variety of night time activities and events.

However, I strongly feel that all is far from lost, that with the right with supports that we can turn this around. We are faced not with a crisis but with an opportunity; an opportunity to capitalise on what we have; to bring real Irish culture to the fore and allow a night-time economy to flourish that can be among the best in the world.

Ireland is a unique mix of cosmopolitan and traditional, our people are well-travelled, multi-cultural, broad-minded and always welcoming of new experience. Our nightlife should and could reflect this provided it is given the opportunity to grow and thrive.

I am here today representing my company Central Arts and my city Waterford. I also feel in some sense that I am representing our smaller regional cities and towns and rural areas; to let you know what we face.

There is a commonly held belief at present that Dublin night life culture is dying; and while this may be true, know that it is happening all over Ireland, and we have been feeling it for a long time.

In 2014 during the dark days of recession, austerity and job losses, my partner and I decided to reinvest our savings and some redundancy money into an alternative venue that offered something different but something for everyone... an alternative nighttime space. I come from a social work background and my partner is a theatre producer and artist. With our eclectic mix of skills we decided to give it a go! So Central Arts was born.

Our venue is small but perfect for what we do, nestled in the heart of the Viking Triangle. With the support of our local county council (€10,000 per annum) we set out to do something we felt was entirely new and create a venue and for arts and entertainment that was an alternative and complimentary to every other night-time space.

A unique offering and providing a service for people like ourselves – of whom there are many – who would like a vibrant night time offering, just on a smaller scale.

Our ambitions are modest and our expectations scaled. We only have 50 seats and are far from a commercial venture; somewhere between a small family business and a social enterprise. It is safe to say that without the support of our local council officials we would not be where we are today.

We are a venue - a black box theatre - and an arts company.

At the heart of what we do is to break down the inherent exclusivity of the Arts and make arts and culture accessible to everyone. We strongly believe in this inclusivity and want to open up the general understanding of what culture is, creating a space for contemporary and traditional entertainment offerings.

People are social animals and want to be afforded different ways to socialise. We feel that with our arts, festivals and community work that we break down the barriers giving access to the arts, the young people that come to an electronic music event in our now also come to our theatre shows. Our audiences are crossing over.

As the company has grown so has our remit – it now includes festivals, workshops and a number of mentoring programmes that help young people find their way into careers in the Arts, events and performance. We have been a home for artists, musicians and theatre makers. Our own productions have toured nationally and internationally.

This broad remit has meant that we have an offering for all our community. Thousands of people have crossed our threshold, to perform, enjoy or engage with a diverse offering of modern and traditional Irish Culture.

However, after five years of hard work to make this idea a success, we sadly now find that the space in which we exist is being squeezed and that the freedom to provide an alternative to the mainstream alcohol-based nightlife culture is becoming increasingly elusive.

This August we were informed by the Gardaí that to continue to with an electronic music offering that we would have to apply to the courts for a Public Dance License, or to cease these nights immediately. We were subsequently told by our insurers that to afford the necessary insurance cover to hold such a license, we would need to have turnover well in excess of a million; clearly something out of the reach of a small, 50 seat arts venue.

We never wished to serve alcohol in our premises or to have alcohol central to our model, but are now in a position that we are being forced to do this to be able to continue providing a programme of entertainment at nighttime. We must now become licensed to continue existing.

Central Arts has a business model that is unique and has been proven successful, however as an alternative venue there is no protection or support for us. Grass roots music and arts venues are becoming a thing of the past. We were born of the recession and the want to make something happen in our city when there was so little; now with the green shoots of recovery growing around us, we wonder if there is any room left for us to exist...

Where will and how will young people get their start in the arts and entertainment industries if there is no infrastructure to support them?

I feel our idea of what Irish Culture is becoming narrow and we need to re-examine this to include contemporary art forms, new cultures and alternative ideas and forms of

performance; not only that but to allow them to flourish as part of a night-time culture that allows opportunity for every alternative.

We have been unable to access any funding or support on a national level; there is a commonly-held belief in regional Ireland that arts and culture funding does not trickle down past the Capital.

And what can be done to protect and encourage alternative night life, and night life as a whole?

As the Give Us The Night campaign has been putting forward, the legislation that dictates our nighttime economy is out dated, it needs to be re-examined and overhauled (certainly including the application process) and with allowance for venues outside the mainstream licensing system.

We need to look to Europe to bring our night time offerings into line with its more successful examples and cannot do so while constrained by the current licensing system.

As we have found in Waterford, the Garda has a lot of power to dictate the night time economy which has resulted in a national inequality where our closing time is earlier than anywhere else in Ireland.

Likewise, the insurance industry and claims culture is having huge effect on nightlife, with runaway premiums that are single-handedly pushing small independent venues and festivals out of business.

There needs to be more support for grass roots organisations, for those who provide diverse offerings and for smaller venues such as ours who will never turn over a million euros in a year.



Ciara O Connell,

Director,

Central Arts.

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