

Impact of Covid-19 on the amateur performance sector.

Presented by the Drama League of Ireland, the Amateur Drama Council of Ireland and the Association of Irish Musical Societies.

The impact of the corona virus pandemic on amateur theatre and amateur musical theatre has been devastating all over the island of Ireland over the past 18 months. These activities are at the core of community cultural activity across the island. The absence of a platform for performers, and people involved in the creative element of theatre such as designers, directors, Musical Directors and Orchestra musicians, lighting and sound technicians, costuming personnel, set designers and builders, make-up artists, special effects creators, as well as a huge backup team that are essential to ensuring the success of a stage production, has created a huge void in towns and villages all over the country.

Putting on stage activities in the autumn and winter periods is to a community what sporting activities are in the summer period. These activities galvanise a community, and not just local communities, but neighbouring communities support each other in these activities, creating a complex web of social and cultural interaction and networking that is unique to Irish Society. All this has been put on hold, and the numbers affected are staggering. The participants range in age from 10 years old to people in their 80's, it embraces all age groups, irrelevant of class, gender, orientation, religion or creed.

In amateur theatre, we estimate that there are approximately 700 drama groups on the island of Ireland, with approximately 25,000 people directly involved. These groups attract an audience, whether local or participating in amateur drama festivals – both full length and one act festivals - of up to 1m people every year. Many of our top professional actors began their careers in amateur theatre.

The Amateur Drama Council of Ireland (ADCI) is the governing body of affiliated Drama Festivals on this Island. In total there are 40 affiliated members, between full length and one act festivals. They offer the unique experience to over 50 drama groups to perform all over the country, with the added bonus of getting a professional adjudication on their work. The value of this professional adjudication has helped raise the standards of production greatly.

There are approximately 120 musical societies on the island of Ireland, with 14,000 members who again offer a unique outlet for people of all ages to express themselves and participate in this very popular activity, putting on performances for local communities, and participating in the very popular AIMS competitions. These shows attract an audience of 1.2m annually. Musical societies perform in theatres, community halls and schools nationwide, and are a vital part of our communities, sometimes being the first introduction to Broadway/WestEnd Shows.

The impact of the loss of these activities in this sector cannot be overestimated, and the impact on the mental health of those involved, and indeed those who look forward so much to attending these events, again, cannot be overestimated.

One of the positives of the pandemic has been that it forced the sector to think creatively, with many online and outdoor events being performed last year – indeed it was noted in the Sunday Observer that the only artistic performance in Ireland and the UK on a certain week in July last year was by an amateur drama group in Wexford! In the winter months the Amateur Drama Council of Ireland kept us engaged with their popular lockdown conversations. Some musical societies have been very proactive in trying to keep members together by way of online chats, concerts, bingo, quizzes etc. At this stage I think we are all fatigued and zoomed out. We are ready to get back together and back performing again.

However we need to look forward positively, but we do need some assistance to stimulate the amateur performance sector, and to entice our practitioners back to doing these ever so important cultural activities. At this point we wish to gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the Arts Council which was allocated last week.

We would like a clear roadmap from government outlining exactly when this Autumn we can get back to rehearsing, and if our theatres and community venues are to open up again, with full houses and we can have full casts onstage for performance. All performing groups are going to need an 8 - 12 week/rehearsal preparation period to allow this to happen. The huge numbers of people who attend amateur performances need to know that they can come back into our performance spaces again, they are the lifeline of our activities, and the life's blood of community support and involvement.

Because all activity has ceased in live performance over the past 18 months, the financial support earned through box office and sponsorship has dried up completely. The follow on to this is that the representative bodies, such as our own, DLI, ADCI and AIMS, have suffered a similar consequence, with our income streams completely depleted. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Arts Council's recent grant allocations for a Pilot Scheme, to enhance mentorship between amateur and professional drama and musical theatre. We would require that financial support be made available to our organisations on an annual basis once this pilot scheme is completed, and this to ensure the survival of a dynamic and thriving amateur performance sector, which is so important to the people in every town and village throughout the island of Ireland.