



15th November 2023

OPENING STATEMENT

A.O.I.F.E. thanks the Joint Committee for this opportunity to address members regarding the challenges facing Local and Community Arts.

Our Arts Festival form or local Community participatory event does not follow a genesis similar to our continental cousins, the appendix suggests a potted history.

The Tourism Agency stopped sponsoring but not promoting festivals from the early 70s to 1995 over some blighted policy. In the early 90s a desire of the Arts Council and the creative world to make state subsidised arts programming available to the population outside of the Capital used Community Arts events and Festivals to act as a counterbalance to the capital consuming 75% of the available budget which was always paltry.

Wheel forward to modern times and our festival and community arts event scene would be about 700 annually – possibly too many, being run on shoestrings by a regulatory hassled volunteer yeomanry and more sophisticated audience demands and stretched State. Cobbling from one year to the next the fundraising, the chasing of grants, programming and the production of it all and wondering possibly where the fun has gone.

The private and for profit festival and cultural event scene dubbed the Live Performance Industry would see some 150 annual festival type events.





The 70s and early 80s were possibly where the seeds of most of the oldest Multi Disciplinary Art Festivals and some niche Arts events germinated with support from Local Authority Arts Officers.

In more recent times the Arts Council , Tourism authorities and especially the very welcome efforts of Creative Ireland have created and curated supports and funding structures that meet their relevant policy sub sets investing millions annually – island wide.

It must be noted and welcomed that during the pandemic this State's supporting Arts Organisations and this Committee in particular were strong in their practical supports for all manner of arts, but especially the performers . Some of the legacy of the work by various Task Forces will greatly add to the enrichment of our local arts scene – eg. the pilot scheme on Artists Basic Income Support.

What is very often overlooked is that whilst each agency vies at times for omnipotence in the Local Arts sector – it is the Municipal or Local Authorities who cumulatively contribute the largest amount of public subsidy to their local cultural and arts events – driven and focused by local needs and priorities with no overarching policy construct.

In AOIFE's formation and development through most of the 90s and indeed early decade of this century the Local Authorities have remained steadfast in their support for the network and it's resourcing.

In essence policy makers and bureaucrats have to re imagine our sector from the ground zero – not from where a lot are currently .





Typically the list of main structural issues aside from cashflow which in fairness to the Oireachtas has improved over the past 30 years and overall increase in costs includes :

- The obliteration of competent public realm practical management – since Minsters Hogan’s reform of local administration.
- The indifference of some public officials to the needs of communities to be helped around administrative rapids in accessing – plazas, squares, parks, streetscape for their local arts activity.
- The Post Covid – Volunteer Exhaustion in our Communities across all aspects but especially in creating safe and sustainable community events.
- The acute and growing dichotomy between the professional arts administrator and the keen committed community activist – with no appreciation of the ecology of arts practice, audience development and local accent to the narrative of presentation.
- The huge burden of responsibility from statutory processes, regulations , Health and Safety, Duty of Care and Insurance issues that have ungainly manifested themselves in pro bono events.
- The huge pressure and costs on local event space vis a vis Community Halls, School Assembly Halls, Theatres, Hotels, public buildings - due to a variety of recent and regulatory issues.
- The new pressure on Community Arts Events Organisers to have Greening policies in places where the local authority or the trade



interests are not up to speed fully with temporary segregation, recycling, or water provision facilities.

- The loss of family firms on our high streets in pharmacy, grocery, food, hospitality and even services to National Chains ; is diminishing savagely the ability to attract sponsorship of our local community arts events and festivals.
- The lack of appreciation of all those actors to the sector to view the making of these events as a social enterprise that needs to be sustainable.
- The huge deadweight of GDPR in allowing local officials to share adequately relevant vital information on performers, crafters, musicians , artistes etc, within an area – preventing us sharing and networking more.
- The lack of any urgency to support groups within communities and areas to work collaboratively and strategically to share resources, know how , equipment and audiences to improve sustainability.
- The common misunderstanding that Community and Local arts events are competing with each other when truly it is Netflix and the Off-licence are our largest competitors.
- The Cinderella of the Local Authority service – the Library is the largest singular vehicle when commanded well to spearhead innovation in the local arts and community space.



- The growing gap between the local educational campuses and their own community unique activities or lore , traditions.
- The changing regional media / provincial paper landscape and attendant pressures on programming content for all local media and especially local radio.
- The emerging chaos in direction for the National Broadcaster and it's ability to spotlight and showcase local.

In common with other First World Societies the current post World War outdated view of scaffolding local arts activity for narrow artistic goals as opposed to the wider benefit of community will see more of us accept that : Local Arts Events are increasingly about :

- Platforms for an artform to grow new audience outreach
- Development Labs for innovative ways of presentation and production of staging and participating.
- Vital tools for exchange of learning and practice
- Cross generational activities that build positive memories
- Promote Community Cohesion in a safe, welcoming congregated setting.
- Improve the Health and Wellness of the participants and audience.
- Show ways to build on empowerment and neighbourhood building.





- Become significant tools for placemaking.
- Evolve into comfortable gateways for othering and welcoming of new commers of all strata, ethnicity, religion or orientation to a village, suburb, town , place , city.
- Are an effective way in keeping what will be in 1 in 4 adults over the age of 65 with 3 decades of living ahead of them- animated, engaged and stimulated in their own locale without expensive institutional care packages.
- Become true barometers for vibrancy of a place – assisting with inward investment and migration.

We are under no illusion we are not rebooting, we are rebuilding, as long as weekend activity for youth and indeed weekday activity for the new teenagers sees all manner of subsidy for participation in Sport but a significant cost to the participant for culture we are in danger of letting slip what our Bellaghy Laurate Heaney depicted as the “ Given Note “.

Very happy to take questions Cathaoirleach .

APPENDIX 1 – Background History to Irish Festival – Local Community Arts Development

Perhaps our Festival story of the 20th century mirrored our Nordic colleagues; where to commemorate and celebrate was cleverly and closely aligned with national and cultural identity. Significantly, though our young independent state from the 20s to the 60s was never flush with state resources to invest in Festivals and Culture and local administration was also impoverished.





The ancient Gaelic Feis – was the traditional DISPLAY or Exhibition of Culture, Music and Art from Queen Maeve's time; its lofty high artistic ideals of the hosting chieftains well swamped with Mead, Mutton and general debauchery - probably made Feile's in Thurles in the early 90s look like a Montessori gathering!

The Flight of the Earls and the dispossession of Catholics under the Elizabethan and subsequent conquests removed the patronage of families to the poet, piper, the harpist, the minstrels of the gallery and for the first time in 3,000 years the Irish spirit of congregated hospitality, culture, music, art and welcome to local and stranger evaporated somewhat. Its DNA was cultivated in the hedge school, in the bardic – nomadic tradition and in the continual development of large market towns and the hosting of Fairs.

For most of the 17th, 18th, 19th and a great deal of the 20th century no Festival per se existed to platform local heritage, culture, music or celebrate community. The ancient Fairs of Lammass, Ballinasloe and Puck somehow did not go the way of Donnybrook. Emigration provided other laboratories for our local music, song and lore to evolve and enrich. The Social Media for most of these centuries - for preserving so much of the lore that Seamus Ennis, Ciaran Mac Mathuna and Sean Mc Reamoin eventually harvested with the Folklore Commission and the RTE outdoor recording unit – was the street balladeer or musician; which evolved into sheet music.

The understanding of the Classical Cannon was stunted to the Cities with large labour force who were the patrons of the Operahouse, Variety Halls and Concerts. The Music of the Big House somehow became associated primarily with the landed Ascendancy Class as opposed to the ordinary folk continued well into the 1960s.

The accessibility of the new middle class in the 1890s to bicycle ownership and Douglas Hyde's Gaelic League wrapped the Celtic madness of unbridled communal festivity in a complete Irish blanket of respectability. Welcoming back into vogue with the early Oireachtas (Assembly for Freeman for Patriotic Purposes) and Feiseanna (Cultural Competitions in Irish Music Folklore and Dance) of the first 4 decades of the 20th century.





It was not until the late 60s before the Church got around to decrying Douglas's Gaelic idea of a Fleadh Cheol (Large Gathering for the displaying of Irish Traditional Music, Song and Dance) in the debris of bottles and hedonism but by then the State had already let the genie out of the bottle in supporting the first Toastal (An Official Irish Homecoming Gathering) in 1953.

We had two Gatherings – one in 2014 and the other that started in '53 as a Government plan to get as many of the diaspora back to spend their money during the holidays – if only the local communities organised summer events and festivals to welcome them – it's still continued in Drumshambo, Co Leitrim to this day!

A great deal of the Classic and Megga Ballrooms were built on the proceeds of Carnival Tent dances for whole weeks of summer and harvest time. The Tidy Towns is one of it's enduring legacies to Community.

Todd Andrew's Tourism Authority of 1952 aggressively funded, promoted any Town with a Hotel to create a Local Festival and was grant aided by the state from 1953 – 1959. The oldest of our modern calendar owe their origins to this period – Cork Jazz, Cork Film, Dublin Theatre, Dublin Film, St. Patrick's Day, Galway Oyster, Waterford Light Opera, Wexford Opera, Rose of Tralee International.

Tourism interests, Chambers of Commerce and clever far reaching local authorities combined for the next 40 years back and supported by the might of the Brewers and Distillers marketing budget to develop a local cultural and regional festivals and events programme.

