

Ms. Aileen Fallon,
Committee Clerk (Work Programme),
Special Committee on Covid-19 Response,
Houses of the Oireachtas Service,
Kildare House,
Dublin 2.



Friday 26th June 2020

Dear Ms. Fallon,

Please find enclosed, a response to the requested written submission on the topic of COVID-19 and its impact on the arts and entertainment sector, with particular reference to the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's national theatre.

My Co-Director Neil Murray and I, welcome the invitation to share our perspective with the Committee, and provide some insight into the hardships facing theatre makers at this extremely challenging time.

If the Committee requires further assistance, including opportunity to discuss our views in more detail, we would be happy to make ourselves available to attend.

Yours sincerely,

Graham McLaren
Joint Director and CEO of the Abbey Theatre

THE ABBEY THEATRE

Rebooting the Economy: The Arts and Entertainment Sector

26.06.2020

By Graham McLaren and Neil Murray, Directors and CEOs of the Abbey Theatre



1. About the Abbey Theatre

1.1 Founded in 1904 by Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats, the Abbey Theatre is Ireland's national theatre. For over a century, the Abbey Theatre has played a major role in reflecting Ireland's evolving cultural, political and social identity. It has done so through the creation and staging of an important literary repertoire which helped Irish people to understand and communicate what it means to be Irish.

1.2 Over the last 116 years, the plays of Sean O’Casey, J.M. Synge, Teresa Deevy, Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Marina Carr, Frank McGuinness, Roddy Doyle, Nancy Harris, Stacey Gregg, Phillip McMahon, David Ireland, Carmel Winters and Lisa Tierney-Keogh have premiered on our stages. The Abbey has famously withstood and returned from war, fires, riots and controversies and will always be a place where national conversations take stage.

1.3 When we took up our positions as joint Directors and CEOs of the organisation in 2016, we set about opening the doors as wide as we could. We want to reflect and support Ireland’s artists and audiences in all their diversity. This commitment applies to every aspect of the theatre’s operations - from art and audience, to outreach and education, workforce planning and development, income generation and financial sustainability.

1.4 The Abbey’s Five Year Strategy (2019-2023) seeks to build a theatre and company where creativity drives our every move, as we build a home for brave, bold and breathtaking stories that are relevant to our times. The strategy ensures a consistent focus on new work, providing space and time to support artistic exploration and experimentation, alongside the Abbey’s relationship with established Irish playwrights and artists. The theatre’s commitment to new approaches and interpretations of the rich Irish theatre repertoire is a core part of our vision.

1.5 Our mission, vision and values seek to place the Abbey at the heart of the Irish theatrical ecosystem by nurturing and developing the artform together with its emerging and established artists. We rightly celebrate the lauded history of the Abbey Theatre, but also believe that the Abbey Theatre’s best days lie ahead.

2. COVID-19 and theatre makers

2.1 Like many other sectors and industries, theatre could see COVID-19 coming, but the severity of the impact could not have been anticipated. In February, we established an internal working group to prepare for the oncoming crisis. When the instruction came on the morning of 12 March from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to cancel that evening’s performance of *The Fall of The Second Republic*, we had a strong feeling

that theatre would be “First Out, Last Back”. What we didn’t anticipate was when “Last Back” would happen, and what that would look like. To some extent, we still don’t know.



(left) The abandoned set of *The Fall of the Second Republic*, pictured during COVID-19 lockdown 2020

2.2 The immediate impact was the rolling cancellation or postponement of 2020 projects. Initially, a major new production of Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer* fell, but this has now been followed

by the entirety of our 2020 programme. Throughout the sector, many projects have been in development for years and that investment in preparation in mounting a project for the stage is lost. Equally, beyond the stage run, long lives for many of these projects could have been envisaged. The Abbey honoured all of our 2020 contract payments for artists. However, the majority of other theatre organisations and producers were not in a position to do this and many artists’ livelihoods have been threatened. Anecdotally, many artists are already leaving the industry.

2.3 Where are we now? COVID-19 has unleashed a full-blown crisis and the Irish theatre sector is desperately struggling in the midst of this. Theatre is a survivor – an artform 2,500 years old that has evolved whilst retaining its original purpose. It will survive this, but we need support.

2.4 How do we make theatre in a socially distanced world? Theatre thrives on physical interaction, often predicated around love and conflict. That is difficult when there are two (or even one) metres between any performers on a stage. How many people can share dressing rooms? How do you hold a costume fitting?

2.5 A recent audience survey indicates 42%¹ of regular theatre-goers are reluctant to return to enclosed live event auditoriums within the coming four months, and additional data

¹ Indigo After the Interval Survey May 2020

reports 54%² of all consumers feel “uncomfortable” about attending indoor events. At the time of making this submission, with the current social distancing protocol of 2m reducing the capacity of the Abbey auditorium from 492 to 52, the economics of making theatre is questionable. In the short term, theatre makers can work digitally, improvise with outdoor and site specific work where we can, at least, overcome some of the problems caused by social distancing, and even make certain bespoke work in our theatre for small audiences. However, until we can safely and responsibly fill our houses, tough times lie ahead. Indeed, the opening of our theatres in any form presents challenges and costs unforeseen. Equipping venues for a COVID-19 world with the physical and safety requirements necessary to make spaces safe for our artists, audiences and staff is a journey we are only now embarking upon.

3. COVID-19 and the Abbey Theatre

3.1 The Abbey Theatre has weathered the Spanish Flu, World Wars, riots and fires, and on each occasion has adapted to the change those circumstances presented, and become stronger.

3.2 The large majority of our staff are now working from home. Since the 12 March closure, our entire programme of work, just like every other theatre in the world, was either postponed or cancelled. Our producing team has contacted 67 theatre-makers to reassure them that their contracts would be honoured. Our box office team contacted the 4,288 patrons who had booked tickets for the forthcoming shows returning 10,105 tickets. A total of €263,190 in pre-sold tickets was returned during the closure period. Our earned income makes up 40% of our annual budget.

3.3 On the second week of “lockdown”, the Abbey devised *Dear Ireland*, as a direct response to what we saw as the clear and immediate financial impacts that freelance theatre-makers were facing. The artists, administrators and technicians working in the sector were trying to cope with an unprecedented drop in employment, to almost 0% activity.

² Fáilte Ireland COVID 19
Consumer Sentiment Behaviour June 2020

3.4 The Abbey Theatre built a lifeline between artists and audience. We were keen to reassure our stakeholders that, just as the Abbey Theatre has done in the past, we will use this moment to innovate. Over four nights (28 April - 1 May), audiences watched the world



premiere of *Dear Ireland* on the Abbey's YouTube channel. This was a historic digital theatre project which brought together 50 brand new monologue commissions. Each piece of work was written and created in self isolation by 100 participating artists.

3.5 To date, over 150,000 people from around the world have watched *Dear Ireland* during COVID-19, confirming the audience's desire for new artistic work that responds to a challenging collective human

experience.

3.6 As we write this document, the Abbey is preparing to announce the first six months of an "extraordinary season". Presenting a mixed programme of digital work for an online audience, live performance for a live audience in site specific locations across the country, and bespoke theatre shows for a socially distant audience at our home in Abbey Street.

3.7 The work of Ireland's national theatre responds and will continue to reflect the challenges being faced by Irish society. We are, and will remain, artist-led and audience-focused.

4. The evolution of Ireland's national theatre

4.1 There can be few theatres in the world that can claim to have had such an influence on its citizens as the Abbey Theatre. It has helped create Ireland's sense of itself, both at home and away. From the formation of the State itself — whilst bullets whistled through windows — through every social and political reform of the last century, the Abbey Theatre has provided provocations and perspectives from some of our nation's finest minds promoting inclusiveness, diversity and equality.

4.2 At this time of a global pandemic, we must put the health and wellbeing of our artists, staff and our audience at the heart of all of our work. Adapting our production model to deliver a blend of socially distant live performances and online performances, the Abbey Theatre will continue to lead in the telling of the whole Irish story, in English and in Irish, ensuring the Abbey is a theatre for the entire island of Ireland and for all its people, at all times.

4.3 As one of our founders, W.B. Yeats said:

“Every trial endured and weathered in the right spirit makes a soul nobler and stronger than it was before.”

4.4 If ever we needed the space and perspective that theatre can give us, it is now. It is crucial that we come together to reflect upon where we are as a nation. What we hold dear. What our true values are. To grapple with the concepts too complex for binary polemic and rhetoric. To forge a path for a new Ireland.

4.5 We now forecast a 30% reduction in our total income for 2020 and while Government income is maintained, our earned income will fall by 67%. However, the Abbey has no major immediate financial emergencies, and is about to announce an exciting bespoke programme of work that is ambitious, diverse and balanced. We have been able to achieve this through the tireless work of our staff through this period and our Arts Council, the Government’s Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and donor funding which has allowed us to invest €1.2M into our artistic programme, benefitting approximately 320 freelance artists, at a time they need it most.

4.6 We must tread carefully. The impact of even the smallest cut to our grant at this time would be catastrophic for the national theatre and the nation’s theatre makers. The Abbey has never fully recovered from the significant cuts of 2008 when it was understood that a cut below the current levels of funding would damage productivity and threaten the very livelihood and future of the Abbey Theatre and the artists it works with. With that in mind we would urge a care for the Abbey and its unique place in the nation’s cultural life during

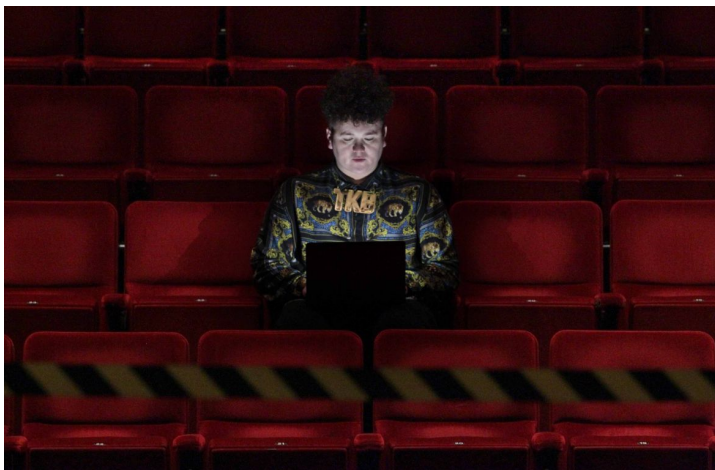
the potential economic downturn facing the nation in the coming months and, possibly, years.

5. The Government's response to COVID-19

5.1 The Abbey Theatre has welcomed the support of the Government's COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Support Scheme and has benefited from the support this offered to our organisation and, particularly, our staff. The safeguarding of employment has been a key priority for the executive during this crisis, and will continue to be so.

5.2 The Government's recent announcement of €20M emergency funds allocated to the Arts Council, and an additional €5M for securing the future of key cultural and museum spaces and facilities, is also welcomed by the Abbey Theatre.

5.3 However, the Government and Arts Council's earlier misstep, hastily announcing just €1M for the sector in April, gave a false impression that this was all that was being offered as additional support. This left our colleagues within theatre feeling abandoned and, thankfully, this has proven not to be the case. Similarly, the Arts Council acted impressively quickly in announcing all 2020 grants would be honoured and advance cash flowing funds. The reality has been somewhat different and our core grant has only very recently been



confirmed. We believe we are not alone in this situation. Artists and organisations are in a desperate position and funding representative bodies must act quickly and decisively to make cash flow available to businesses.

(left) Playwright TKB pictured at the Abbey Theatre during the COVID-19 closure.

5.4 The new funds announced are crucial to sustain our community during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, but we would stress this should be seen as just an important **first step** towards renewal - with the recognition that there are many more steps on the road out of

this crisis. We are grateful the arts and culture sector has been recognised for its strategic role to play in Ireland's life and recovery from this devastating pandemic.

5.5 The concerted efforts of both the National Campaign for the Arts and the Arts Council Expert Advisory Group identified an immediate requirement of €20M in 2020, to keep the arts, in Ireland, afloat. The Abbey is in a fortunate position in that our annual grant will allow us to retain our core staff and produce a newly imagined programme of work for 2020.

5.6 Many other theatre organisations find themselves in much deeper peril. In even more dire straits, are individual theatre artists, technicians and practitioners. They are the bedrock of our industry. Every actor in Ireland, for example, no matter their fame, is a freelance artist, often living a precarious existence. Almost all of the work for this group of people has been obliterated. Whilst the emergency Government wage schemes have somewhat helped alleviate the devastation, this subsidy cannot maintain livelihoods and creativity indefinitely and, even then, many independent artists have slipped through the cracks due to their particular circumstances. This crisis has, startlingly, highlighted how many people working in theatre live on a financial knife edge.

5.7 The first immediate challenge will be for the Arts Council to swiftly distribute, in 2020, the €20M additional funds. Given how far we are into the year and the restrictions placed around creating work, a flexible, fleet of foot mechanism is required to ensure the funds are distributed to those who need them most. In the absence of this swift action, we risk losing talented artists without whom theatre will struggle to recover for many decades. We recommend direct investment to artists through increased commissions, bursaries and, in some cases, direct cash injection. When things recover, perhaps mid-late 2021, in terms of creating new work for large audiences, we need to ensure the best of our talent has not deserted the industry.

5.8 Secondly, we need to futureproof the theatre sector so that when the next major crisis occurs, we are not immediately threatened with almost certain decimation. Action must be taken to provide long term increased investment in theatre and the arts. Statistically Ireland is at the bottom of the league of GDP contribution for the arts sectors in Europe. This year's

injection of an additional €25M must not be seen as a one-off rescue, but only the start of long term strategic investment to get Ireland close to, or beyond the average EU spend of 0.6% GDP on arts and culture.

5.9 Ireland, rightly, is held in high esteem culturally, yet when we look at how arts and theatre are funded by our European counterparts, we flounder. Germany, for example, rolled out a staggering €1BN COVID-19 aid package for arts and culture. Social security (including unemployment insurance) will also be made available to freelancers—including artists—for a period of six months, and expenses for housing will be recognised to ensure that “everyone can stay in their own home.” In mid-March, the federal government pledged a package that included support for self-employed workers, including artists. The funding is being distributed as grants and bridge loans of €9,000 and €15,000. At the same time, states introduced various measures of support. Berlin, for example, granted €1.4BN in the form of individual €5,000 grants to freelancers and €15,000 to small arts businesses.

5.10 Meanwhile, the President of France has called for a 12-month extension to special unemployment benefits for actors, performers, musicians and technicians, a scheme designed to protect them in the downtime between jobs, helping to sustain an industry that employs 1.3 million people across France — many of whom can no longer produce work due to the pandemic. The “intermittents du spectacle” workers benefit from a special unemployment insurance scheme, which sees them receive a monthly stipend, paid by the state providing they work 507 hours over a 12-month period. Most actors working, for example, on one Abbey show a year, would qualify for such a benefit. Whilst the annual payment is reportedly a modest €14,000 annually, it becomes the crucial difference between an artist being able to pay, or not pay, their rent in between jobs.

5.11 The examples of France and Germany, above, point to the creation of a Universal Basic Income system. Of course, this is a wider societal issue, but we recommend this is prioritised for artists in this country. The Arts Council, venues and producers all have valuable statistical information that could form a template of information required for individuals to qualify for an artist UBI scheme, similar to the French ‘intermittent du spectacle’ initiative.

5.12 This crisis must act as a wake up call so that in good times artists feel valued and in bad times a protective support system is in place to secure their future. These examples exist in our near neighbours and inspiration should be drawn to stabilise the Irish arts sector.

5.13 Ireland famously punches far above its weight, culturally. Government agencies use culture to exemplify the values of the nation, founded upon the brilliance of its artistic voices. Funding the arts properly is not a luxury. It is an investment that repays many times over, economically. At the Abbey alone, 14% of our audience are visitors from abroad. Irish theatre is part of a cultural suite of attractions which bring thousands of visitors to Ireland, contributing to the €5.6BN tourism brings annually to the Irish economy. The value artists bring to Ireland's people and Irish society is incalculable.

6. The final act

6.1 The Abbey Theatre is not just a building: it is, and always has been, a chain of ideas and a conduit for the voices of the people of Ireland; a channel of empathy, entertainment and provocation. We physically come together to create and share our work with our audiences, to touch their hearts and their minds, and this virus strikes deep into that collective experience.

6.2 The Abbey Theatre's reputation as a world leader in the arts, both at home and internationally places us in an important position to strongly advocate for the preservation, reform and revitalisation of Ireland's treatment of artists and its artistic landscape.

6.3 Theatre is an enduring and resolute artform and the national theatre will continually seek to create opportunities for Irish artists to create work and connect with audiences. However, the Abbey alone cannot solely prevent the collapse of Ireland's theatrical infrastructure and ecosystem. We are proud of our company's response during COVID-19, but the sector is in crisis and that urgency needs to be addressed in the longer term.

6.4 It is unarguable that Ireland trades on its cultural capital. The arts are crucial to maintaining Ireland's prestigious reputation as a leader internationally and now is the time

for that unique asset to be reinforced with bold action. The Directors of the Abbey Theatre urge the Government and the Committee to seize this moment in our nation's history to enshrine the value we place on our artists. Again, in the words of W.B. Yeats: "Do not wait to strike till the iron is hot; but make it hot by striking".