

What Art Can Do For You
Dr Miriam Haughton
Drama and Theatre Studies, NUI Galway
February 2019

Who are we making art for?

Art made me political, or perhaps I was already political, but art provided me with the tools to engage politically in the community in which I live. Art is an experience for the audience, but also a vehicle to engage with history: one that captures experience, past and present, and isn't confined to language for expression. When you're dealing with historical trauma, there's very little language can do. Embodiment, interaction, and the energy that surrounds human lives, can be sensed and communicated via art. I usually leave an artistic experience intrigued, uplifted or angry.

This event today is inspired by the collaboration of ANU and CoisCéim, and I want to speak a little about how their work inspires their audiences, and speaks to the concerns of the island of Ireland in urgent and insightful ways. *These Rooms*, as well as many other productions I have seen from both companies, remind us that we are citizens. As citizens, we have rights and responsibilities. We are strong and we are vulnerable. And we can only exist through co-existence, through the formation of community. As citizens, we are informed by our histories, sometimes we are traumatised by them, but we should not allow ourselves to be limited by them as we imagine and re-imagine our futures. This political role of art – directly responding to the social crisis and potential of the times we are in – can also be found in the history of Irish art, in particular, the theatre artists who founded the national theatre over a hundred years ago, against all the odds. The Abbey Theatre became established, produced

work and nurtured emerging talent, who were fundamental to creating a narrative which identified not only the struggle of the people living through war, but also their strength and dignity, and the significance of their survival and loss. For me, this is what *These Rooms*, as well as previous productions by ANU and CoisCéim do, but for the communities of today. This is why their work has such visceral impact and political currency, and I think why it transcends their own immediate locales, and works so well touring to new performance contexts.

What are the artistic processes, contexts and commissioning propositions that make that happen

I wish to highlight the founding of the Abbey in 1904 'against all the odds', as we are also here today to speak about artistic processes, contexts and commissioning.

I am not a producer, so I cannot provide immediate detail regarding the coalface of commissioning procedures and contexts. But I can say this: 100 years ago Irish art was made against all the odds because of centuries of war and poverty. 2019 is no easy place to be, but it is a vastly different national, social, economic and political climate. And yet, from what I can see at home, art is still made against all the odds.

This is not an accident. War is not an accident. Homelessness is not an accident. Brexit is not an accident. These crises are the inevitable result of conscious decision-making by political systems. Prevailing ideology creates prevailing infrastructure. Political and socio-economic policies are interlinked, and they determine which values are considered central for the welfare of communities (or certain communities) and consequently which are not. Art has

been allowed to fall through the cracks of the political agenda. Ironically, it is something so visible in certain ways (product), and yet so invisible in other ways (labour). And yet, it is one of the only industries that Ireland consistently produces to world-class standards. It's our only boast – that and the rugby at times! We can utilise Irish art to reinvigorate and inspire young people, old people, new people, all people. It can be produced for international audiences as well as local ones. It is always the centrepiece of national and civic ceremonies and celebrations, particularly in these years of commemorative heritage. It has never let the country down. But the relationship between the arts and the state in Ireland is uneven and based on exploitation. It has been for such a long time that this is rarely questioned, and consciousness-raising can feel like another battle one has to fight, on top of the battle to create work in the first place. So we need to centralise this, and make it a priority visible to all. We need infrastructure that makes the development of art possible and sustainable, flexible and resilient, and this can only happen when the ideology, the value, is agreed upon and made a central focus of public debate and policy.

What would happen if one day we woke up, and there were no more plays, performances, museums, installations, books, music, cinema? What would we do? How would we feel? How would we communicate? I am not necessarily proposing a strike by artists, like the way we see with the guards and the nurses and the teachers – but I would support one, if it were to happen.

Conclusion

On a more positive note, and by way of conclusion, I want to highlight a more local setting, and a sense of change ahead. In 2020, Galway will host the

European Capital of Culture. Right now, it's messy. The artists won the bid largely through their voluntary efforts, to create a collaborative, beautiful, promising, and ambitious bid book. It spoke of community and landscape and togetherness. Then the public bodies took over. Multiple resignations, scandals and one funding crisis later, we are perhaps at the cusp of putting the train back on the tracks at a very late hour. Now the artists are responding. Theatre57 was recently formed, a collective of 75 independent artists and growing who make work in Galway, tired of this lack of infrastructure and this labour market that thrives on precarity. They are tired of making work against all the odds, and see the potential investment from Galway 2020 as a way to create career pathways, fruitful production contexts, and a platform that supports investment and infrastructure. I will end this talk by putting forth their views on processes, contexts and commissioning propositions. I am quoting directly here ('About, Facebook page, Theatre 57 manifesto - edited here to reduce size):

"We live and work in Galway and make theatre against the odds.

We have no permanent rehearsal space. No place for meetings. No office space.

No guaranteed funding. Despite Galway's reputation as Ireland's 'cultural capital', the careers we lead are precarious.

We are concerned about the sustainability of our careers and of those coming after us.

We are concerned about the commodification of the arts and the prevalent valuing of artists under economic terms.

We are concerned about not being heard and not being valued as citizens because we represent neither power nor money.

We do not bear entitlement, and understand that championing arts and culture has never been easy.

We believe in taking responsibility for the shortcomings in our sector but we cannot do this without the support and understanding of the wider community.

We believe that sharing knowledge, supporting one another and striving for professional and creative excellence will lead to a stronger and more diverse creative community in Galway.”