

FOR PRESENTATION

SERVANT, PATRON, AESTHETE AND/OR CO-CREATOR?

Choices and Challenges for Theatre and the Arts in a Time of Turmoil

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PRESENTATION TO THEATRE FORUM

ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2011

A DIALOGUE WITH THE ARTS

As a former Board member of Calypso Theatre I have seen the power of theatre when it engages with political issues. However, I witnessed the brickbats thrown with productions dismissed as instrumentalist or agitprop rather than art. As a former Board member of the Irish Museum of Modern Art I have seen the power of cultural institutions when they engage with disadvantaged communities as both consumers and producers of art. However, I witnessed the tearing apart of this institution for its failure to adequately serve the interests of wealthy patrons.

More recently I have been part of seeking a dialogue with theatre and the arts as a participant in Claiming our Future. This is a civil society based movement for an equal, environmentally sustainable and thriving Ireland. It is a product of the crises that consume our society. It seeks to imagine alternatives to the current political responses to these crises and to build popular support for these alternatives. It aims to be a stimulus for change that brings together the different strands of civil society based on shared values of equality, environmental sustainability, participation, accountability and solidarity. Theatre and the arts have eluded our attempts at dialogue and have largely been absent from this new movement.

Blue Drum launched a New Pact Conversation on the arts, inclusion, equality and human rights last April¹. I was an enthusiastic participant. They usefully describe themselves as working in an ‘imaginary space where culture, politics and community collide’. They point to a broken circuitry between people, culture and the political process. They emphasise the need to find ways to re-set the public value of the arts as a contributor to greater solidarity and equality in families and communities.

The launching pad for this New Pact Conversation was a creative showcase event organised for the Family Resource Centres based in Limerick and Clare. A dialogue with the arts however soon became a dialogue about the arts because only a small number of people from theatre and the arts were present. Nonetheless the dialogue did offer telling insights into the choices being made by theatre and the arts in this time of turmoil.

The very term ‘arts and culture’ was problematic for the participants. Arts and culture were seen as ‘high-falutin’. The term was rejected as excluding and as having little to offer the realities faced by most participants. In one telling exchange the RTE arts programme ‘The View’ was criticised as highbrow and out of touch with ordinary people, whereas RTE’s Nationwide was celebrated as being the best arts programme.

Two different unconnected worlds were evident in the conversation. The world of arts and culture was the world of a distant elite. It was treated with deference by participants and harsh criticism was not deemed appropriate. It was gratefully acknowledged that this ‘high-falutin’ world of arts and culture did indeed talk to people through education and outreach programmes

¹ Carroll E., ‘The Arts, Who Benefits?’, www.eapn.ie

that interpreted exhibitions or shows for them. However, there was muted anger that it was a world that never listened to people explaining and interpreting their situation and experience of poverty and exclusion. This world of arts and culture did not communicate because it could not listen and held no place in communities.

The separate world of community arts emerged from the conversation as part of the lifeblood of communities. This was arts and culture that got people out, linked them up and brought them together. This was arts and culture where people gave expression to their situation and aspirations. It was, however, seen as an arena without status or standing – awaiting validation from an indifferent elite in the world of art and culture.

Theatre, poetry, literature, music and painting do have a tradition of dialogue with communities and of engagement with political realities. This was never more evident than that time of turmoil nearly one hundred years ago now – a time of revolution, of bitter contests, of bold ambitions and of independence and state formation. Theatre and the arts took up the challenge to change and enhance society. Theatre and the arts were a source of learning and a means of communication and stood in solidarity with movements for social and political change.

In these current times of turmoil theatre and the arts appear more distant, aloof, and separate. This is not evidence of a more evolved, civilised and cultured Ireland. It is closer to a betrayal of tradition and a loss of purpose. This betrayal is not unique to theatre and the arts. It is shared across the different sectors of civil society. The largesse of our Celtic Tiger economy has had a deadening impact on all parts of civil society that has served to distract and disarm.

The first challenge I would pose is that theatre and the arts need to reconnect with the turmoil around them and to open up a dialogue with the movements that now seek social and political change.

THE STATE WE ARE IN

In these current times of turmoil we have a banking crisis with what were conservative and trusted institutions found guilty of speculation and mismanagement. We have a fiscal crisis and an economic crisis such that we no longer generate or collect enough wealth to fund the state. We have an unemployment crisis and an emigration crisis that puts a brake on the participation and contribution of whole communities. We have an equality crisis and an environmental crisis that we don't even talk about any more.

We live in an Ireland where brash expenditure, overweening confidence and reckless ambition have been replaced by anxiety, insecurity and despondency. Passivity and paralysis assert themselves. We turn in on ourselves and stick fast to what we know best. Survival is the priority and there is no time or appetite for protest or invention.

We live in a deeply unequal society. A mere one percent of the population holds thirty four percent of the wealth². The richest ten percent of households earn eleven times more than the poorest ten percent of households³. Still we are told by our political leaders that we all have to share the pain.

Politicians and the media insist that we have no alternatives. Austerity is the price required for continued support from international financial institutions. Austerity is deemed to be the key to reclaiming the good times of the Celtic Tiger economy. It is not clear that this is worth reclaiming. It was after all a time of deepening inequality, unsustainable development and over-consumption. It is also far from clear that austerity holds any potential to reclaim it.

We live in a society of two unconnected worlds – that of the ‘haves’ and that of the ‘have-nots’. Art and culture appear to stand with the ‘haves’, sitting at ease with the political and economic elite. Community arts is rigidly confined to the ‘have-nots’. It has become a means of expression of the marginalised and excluded and, in turn, is itself marginalised and excluded.

Community arts is enmeshed and diminished in debates about quality. These debates are an unhelpful distraction. The core issues raised by community arts are not about good and bad art, they are about new forms and processes for theatre and the arts. Community arts offer processes that enable participation and forms based on new types of engagement with communities. Of particular interest is how the practice of the socially engaged artist has emerged from community arts. This is an artistic practice that is predicated on engagement with communities, in particular marginalised communities. It is a practice that points to valuable directions for theatre and the arts in this time of crises.

Theatre and the arts have choices to make. They can choose to help us to imagine. We need to go beyond a language of recovering the past to a language of inventing a future. We need to imagine new ways of organising governance and economic production. Theatre and the arts can choose to help us to understand. We need to move beyond applying ideas and wisdom received from the past to a current predicament that is unprecedented. We cannot rely on inherited ways of working and responding to our difficulties. On the other hand theatre and the arts can choose to resource the political and economic elite. The dominant norms that constrain us can be reinforced. The traditional parameters that shape our society can be affirmed.

A second challenge I would pose is that theatre and the arts need to develop further the forms of socially and politically engaged practice in theatre and the arts. This would involve theatre and the arts in helping us to imagine a new future and to better understand the crises ridden present. This could also benefit theatre and the arts in that this engaged practice offers additional dynamism to the sector as a source of new forms and audiences for theatre and the arts.

² O’Sullivan P., *The Wealth of the Nation: How Ireland’s Wealthy will Invest in the next Decade*, Bank of Ireland Private Banking, Dublin, 2006.

³ Policy Briefing Jan 2011, Social Justice Ireland based on SILC 2009.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE WE ARE IN

Theatre and the arts are just one sector in a wider civil society encompassing a broad spectrum of organisations. These organisations address different themes, give voice to a diversity of groups and provide a plethora of opportunities, experiences and services. It is useful to look at the experience of civil society over times of economic boom and bust in Ireland in order to appreciate the deadening impact of the Celtic Tiger economy on all sectors of civil society, including theatre and the arts.

The economic boom was not kind to civil society. The increased resources available allowed the state and its various agencies to offer a partnership with civil society organisations in managing their new largesse. This partnership was predicated on limiting the roles played by civil society organisations in advocating for fundamental change in the way our society and economy is organised. Advocacy became more focused on the terms on which this new largesse was made available.

The increased resources available allowed the state to provide levels of funding to civil society organisations that went way beyond previous experience. This increased funding was predicated on civil society organisations becoming service providers. Service provision replaced earlier roles offering solidarity, engagement, voice and leadership to marginalised or excluded people. This reduced marginalised and excluded people to consumers of services.

Increased resources and the manner in which they were made available resulted in a taming of civil society. This was experienced in all sectors of civil society, even if it was contested by some organisations and individuals in each of these sectors. Theatre and the arts were not immune to this taming.

Economic crisis has not been kind to civil society either. Resources have been withdrawn from civil society organisations or significantly reduced – including from theatre and the arts. The political space to contest, give witness to, or progress issues of concern to civil society organisations has been curtailed. Partnership is no longer on offer from the state. Civil society organisations have been cast adrift by their benefactors. They have been left anxious about their survival and wondering as to their purpose. There is a disorientation and disempowerment of civil society. The result is passivity within civil society and limited initiative from civil society organisations to create new perspectives and develop new ways of working for social change. This too is part of the experience of theatre and the arts.

The third challenge I would pose is that theatre and the arts need to throw off these shackles of disorientation and disempowerment and secure a new relevance to the state we are now in by redefining and broadening their purpose.

THEATRE AND THE ARTS RESPONDING TO THE STATE WE ARE IN

Theatre and the arts have a valuable contribution to make in assisting an imagining of new forms of society, new ways of working for change and new means of popular expression. Theatre and the arts must redefine or broaden their purpose, speak beyond the confines of its own sector and collaborate with a wider range of organisations and people if they are to make such a contribution.

Theatre and the arts have been quick and effective in organising for survival. The National Campaign for the Arts has been impressive in this regard and a model for other sectors in drawing together the different elements of a sector behind a common and strengthened voice. The focus of such a campaign is inevitably narrowly constructed around funding and investment for the arts, however the messages from the campaign do raise some disturbing questions.

The campaign does set out its belief in the value of the arts and in a society that values creativity, imagination and expression⁴. It points to the role of the arts in enriching our lives. In this, though, it highlights the gain for the individual citizen from the arts. The campaign emphasises the value of the arts to economic growth, tourism and the smart economy. It emphasises the contribution of the arts to enhancing our image and reputation abroad.

I know these messages are pragmatic and tailored to a purpose. However they capture some of the barriers that limit the contribution of theatre and the arts to addressing the times of turmoil we are now in. Theatre and the arts focus on the individual consumer and the pleasure and fulfilment they can offer to this individual. There is no focus on community or society and how theatre and the arts could enable collective endeavour and shape alternative political and economic possibilities.

It would seem that theatre and the arts will only embrace the instrumental when it is at the service of the economic and political elite. Theatre and the arts offer to create the conditions for this elite to sustain their profits in a time of crises by contributing to economic development and to creating more favourable market conditions. There is no focus on theatre and the arts contributing to a democratisation of society through enabling citizens to question their current situation and how it is being managed by this political and economic elite.

The National Campaign for the Arts notes how the new Government needs our help to implement their Programme for Government and to deliver 'the society we all want'. It highlights that an investment in the arts is an investment in Ireland and in the closer realisation of 'the society we all want'. Any consensus about the type of society that is required seems unrealistic in a context of the deep inequalities that persist in our society.

⁴ www.ncfa.ie

The suggestion that such a consensus exists is unhelpful in a context where there is an attempt to smother all types of alternatives being put forward. The role of theatre and the arts in enabling people and communities to imagine different futures to the divided, unsustainable and unequal future being offered by the political and economic elite is denied in suggesting such a consensus exists.

These perspectives are not confined to the National Campaign for the Arts. They find powerful expression in the 'Imagine Ireland' initiative. This programme of Irish arts in the USA was launched in January⁵ this year. Mary Hanafin, then Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sports, highlighted that arts and culture are vital to Ireland's recovery and to the relationship between Ireland and the United States of America. Gabriel Byrne pointed out that there was nothing new in this idea of imagining Ireland. He highlighted the work of William Butler Yeats in founding the Abbey Theatre with the aim of re-imagining Ireland for the 20th Century. He did not contrast this impressive ambition of Yeats with the very limited ambition of 'Imagine Ireland' in imagining Ireland for tourists and investors from the United States of America.

'Imagine Ireland' gives theatre and the arts the function of rebuilding our image and reputation abroad. It gives them the function of boosting economic growth and enabling economic recovery. This purpose grew from discussions at the 2009 Global Irish Economic Forum hosted by the Irish Government in Farmleigh. Business and cultural leaders were brought together to discuss ways to get out of our parlous economic situation. Arts and culture were identified by participants as an effective means to re-engage with the Irish diaspora. The discussion defined a role for arts and culture as a vital door opener abroad for Irish business.

When theatre and the arts choose to speak beyond the confines of their own sector it would appear that the interlocutor of choice is the business sector. Figures from theatre and the arts are largely invisible when it comes to collaboration with any other parts of civil society. Some people from theatre and the arts have participated in some civil society initiatives. This can all too often be limited to individuals fronting high profile and well resourced initiatives that pose little threat to the dominant status quo. This engagement is more akin to a form of patronage than to the collaboration that is required.

Theatre and the arts have yet to reach out in any meaningful way to other parts of civil society. As a result the capacity of theatre and the arts to arouse outrage at our current situation has not been deployed to any significant extent. The potential of theatre and the arts to challenge the ideological forces that sustain a response to crises that merely deepens inequality has yet to be realised. The contribution of theatre and the arts to imagining a different and better society is still awaited.

⁵ www.imagineireland.ie

MAKING CHOICES

There is no one singular purpose for theatre and the arts. It is a diverse sector with different organisations and individuals espousing and pursuing different visions for theatre and the arts. However the full spectrum of possible roles is not being explored to any adequate extent and this is problematic in these times of turmoil. A new dialogue between artists and non artists, and between theatre and arts organisations and civil society organisations espousing equality and justice is necessary to fully develop this spectrum of roles.

The aesthetic is, of course, a key purpose for theatre and the arts. An overemphasis on this role to the exclusion of other roles, though, can deem theatre and the arts to be of value only in and of themselves. Theatre and the arts are separated from the society around them. Art ends up being seen as the pursuit of excellence in which only real artists can participate.

The aesthetic tends to be posed in a very particular individualised way. Theatre and the arts are defined as the product of the creative impulse of the individual artist. They focus on the concerns and inner turmoil of individual protagonists or characters. They are created for the pleasure and fulfilment of individualised consumers who take their personal meaning and inspiration away with them.

This interpretation of the aesthetic separates theatre and the arts from the communities that surround them. Arts and culture become ‘high falutin’ to be occasionally accompanied by investment in public education and outreach to make them somewhat accessible to the people. Theatre and the arts are thus reduced to islands of beauty in a sea of darkness and crisis, an antidote to reality rather than a means to understand and transform reality.

This aesthetic purpose sits all too easily with a secondary purpose currently defined for theatre and the arts. This secondary purpose poses theatre and the arts as servant to the political and economic elite. This is the political and economic elite that sponsors, funds, purchases and consumes theatre and the arts. The market for the aesthetic has to be cared for. Tax concessions, funding and sponsorship for the aesthetic must be protected. This role of servant does not allow the status quo to be questioned or threatened. Theatre and the arts can only be diminished where their purpose is defined in terms of opening doors for business and of serving the smart economy.

Declan McGonagle of NCAD has written powerfully of reconnecting ‘the arts’ aesthetic responsibilities to their ethical responsibilities’⁶. He has challenged the arts to be a ‘provider of vitamins not painkillers in this anxious world.’ This reconnection could inform a different aesthetic just as it could inform a broader purpose for theatre and the arts.

⁶ McGonagle D., *Passive to Active Citizenship: A Role for the Arts’*, Conference Paper, Bologna, 2010.

A different aesthetic would involve theatre and the arts in the themes of concern to community and society as much as the themes of concern to the inner life and identity of individuals. It would involve an increased concern for meaningfulness to society and the communities within society that experience exclusion and marginalisation as much as to the individual consumer. It would afford greater space and status to the artist whose practice draws from an engagement with these communities.

A broader purpose for theatre and the arts would involve theatre and the arts in co-creation and collaboration with people, communities and organisations seeking economic, social and political change in these times of turmoil. Theatre and the arts could challenge the political and economic elite which sustain inequality, poverty and environmental degradation. Theatre and the arts could take on the purpose of imagining the different Ireland that needs to emerge from the crises we face. They could communicate the dreams, the value base, the language and the mindsets needed to make it possible to discuss, popularise, and negotiate the emergence of this different Ireland.

CONCLUSION

Theatre and the arts can play roles of aesthete, servant and patron. They can play roles of co-creator engaged with others in civil society seeking change. They have choices to make. To date the choices made have emphasised the roles of aesthete, servant and patron. Theatre and the arts should also take on the challenge of being co-creator of an equal, sustainable and thriving Ireland.

If theatre and the arts are to meet this challenge they need to reconnect with people and organisations outside their sector. An ongoing dialogue between theatre and the arts and the movements that now seek social and political change has to be developed.

Theatre and the arts need to further develop forms of socially and politically engaged practice. This practice will establish new and challenging relationships between culture, politics and community. This is a practice that will also generate new forms for theatre and the arts, ensure a dynamism in this sector and achieve a new accessibility to arts and culture.