

# IRISH EQUITY NEWS

June 2021



**MEET THE NEW  
EXECUTIVE 2021**

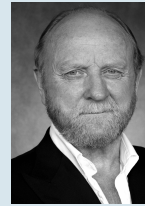
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## INTRODUCING EQUITY NEWS



We are very pleased to welcome you to the latest edition of Equity News. We hope to publish this newsletter regularly throughout

the year. It is important that we, as a community of performers and theatre professionals, keep in touch with each other. This will, we hope, open up that communication. We will include news about what is happening throughout the country in the Arts.

This is your magazine so if you have any thoughts on content for future issues please let us know. We want this to be as informative and relevant to your experience as possible.

We can be contacted at [equity@siptu.ie](mailto:equity@siptu.ie) with any queries or any articles you wish to submit.

I also wish to thank the outgoing president Pdraig Murray and those members of the executive who have worked tirelessly to bring this publication to you. We also want to thank all of our contributors.

We hope you enjoy Equity News and we look forward to hearing from you.

**Gerry O'Brien**  
*Irish Equity President*

# MEET THE EQUITY EXECUTIVE 2021

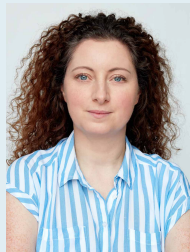


## **PRESIDENT: GERRY O'BRIEN**

Gerry O'Brien made his professional debut at the Gate theatre in 1970. He has worked on most of the stages in Ireland over the years appearing in productions of Shakespeare, Moliere, Yeats, O'Casey, Hugh Leonard, Neil Simon and Tom Murphy. He has appeared in numerous TV plays and series for RTÉ, BBC and US television channels. He is a much sought-after voice actor working in the fields of voice over, audiobook and documentary narration and radio drama. Gerry has been a member of Equity all his career serving first as a rep and later on the Executive. He was elected President at the Equity Annual General Meeting in March 2021.

Gerry has always been passionate in his belief in the importance of the union for all of us in this precarious industry.

He believes that Equity members must serve the next generation, the young student entering a drama school, the individual who begins a film acting course, and to ensure their rights are protected. By fighting for those who are the most vulnerable to the worst aspects of the exploitative nature of this industry we become stronger ourselves.



## **VICE-PRESIDENT: MELISSA NOLAN**

Melissa has over 15 years-experience in the Irish arts industry as an artist, theatre maker and producer. She holds an MA Performance Drama (UCD) and Dip. Arts Media and Entertainment Law (Law Society of Ireland).

Melissa produced the sold-out production What I (Don't) Know About Autism (Jody O'Neill/Abbey Theatre co-production) 2020. This was the first relaxed performance at our national theatre, that is a show that's been adapted to suit people who might require a more relaxed environment when going to the theatre Such as those with learning difficulties, autism or sensory communication disorders. The production collaborated with Arts and Disability Ireland and As I Am (Ireland's national autism charity) to highlight inclusivity through the arts.

Melissa is co-founder of Mouth on Fire Theatre Company, who specialise in the work of Samuel Beckett. The company has toured internationally and has successfully produced world premieres of Irish language Beckett productions. They produced Beckett's All That Fall for President Michael D. Higgins to celebrate Culture Night 2019 at Áras an Uachtaráin.

Melissa believes and strives for a fair, transparent and healthy arts industry where artists and arts workers are properly remunerated, respected and treated.

She is a member of Theatre Forum.



## **TRUSTEE: ANN RUSSELL**

Ann Russell began her career at the Focus Stanislavski Studio in the 1990s, where she worked as an actor, director and Focus Board member until 2001. She also studied at the Strasberg Institute in New York and has an MA in Modern Drama from UCD. Ann has performed in Ireland and the UK. She is a member of ReActors Agency [www.reactors.ie](http://www.reactors.ie)

Ann believes passionately in the value of the arts in society and that access to the arts is a human right, a quality-of-life issue for every citizen, not a luxury.

Currently her focus as a member of the executive is on clear and effective communication with the membership.



## **TRUSTEE: BRYAN MURRAY**

Bryan Murray trained at The Abbey Theatre in Dublin and was a member of the company there for seven years. He has also been a member of The Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre Company in the UK.

He is a well-known face on TV both here and in the UK and is probably best known for his roles as 'Fitz' in Strumpet City, 'Flurry Knox' in The Irish RM, 'Shifty' in Bread, (For which he won BBC TV Personality of The Year) 'Harry Cassidy' in Perfect Scoundrels, 'Trevor Jordache' in Brookside and 'Bob' in Fair City.

Bryan is a member of Irish Equity, British Equity and Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. He now appreciates the opportunity of sharing his experiences as a member of the executive of Irish Equity.





### JOHN O'BRIEN

John has 60 shows to his credit as a director and has been an Equity member for many years. Following the economic crash in 2008 he took a Master's Degree in Business and Management and completed a dissertation on the economy of the Irish Culture sector. Part of his research involved a survey of actor income from film and TV (including royalty payments) over a ten-year period. This started a fascination with the economics of culture and what it tells us about the wider economy and the politics of market design in particular (a PhD topic he has been developing for several years).

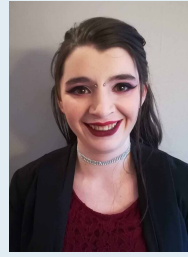
He has works part-time as a lecturer in the UCD Quinn School of Business on the MA in Culture Policy and Arts Management and at Coláiste Dhulaigh, Dublin on the BA in Drama. John also advises on policy and strategy in the arts, culture and the creative sector, working with various local authorities and organisations over the years. His most recent gig was RIOT:SLIGO, an online conference for Sligo County Council that brought together international thought leaders on policy, local wealth development, urban planning, economics, arts, culture and festivals to discuss the challenges facing the arts, culture and creative sectors and the ways to develop a sustainable model.

He completed a report for Equity on how the value of missing royalty payments could be calculated. In the past he has worked as a producer with Guna Nua Theatre Company, as the director of the Riverbank Arts Centre in Newbridge, was a founder and Artistic Director of The Crypt Arts Centre in Dublin Castle and an artistic director of Íomhá Ildánach Theatre Company. He also spent a number of years in film development. He also blogs extensively on matters of culture policy and economics.



### JOHN CRONIN

John has been an actor on stage and screen in Ireland for 30 years, having made his professional debut in The Commitments at the age of 12! Since that time John has built a theatre career that has taken him to the West End, the Edinburgh Festival and to America via the Gate and the Abbey. He has worked for Livin Dred, Prime Cut, Loose Canon, Anu Productions, Theatre Club, Collapsing Horse, Second Age and Rough Magic and is due to appear in the latter's Dublin Theatre Festival production of GLUE in October 2021. He also has an extensive career on screen in Ireland and beyond, appearing in series for RTE, BBC and Sky as well as feature films with actors such as Jackie Chan and Hugo Weaving. Most recently he is to be found in Carrigstown playing the villainous Will Casey in Fair City. He also has a degree in English and History from UCD and a Diploma in Marketing and Advertising from the Fitzwilliam Institute.



### THEATRE PROFESSIONALS: SHANNON COWAN

Shannon Cowan (She/Her) is a Dublin based freelance stage manager and technician who has been working in the Irish Theatre industry since her graduation from Inchicore College of Further Education in 2017. She is looking forward to working with the Equity Executive over the coming years to achieve an equal voice for all workers in the Arts and Events industry.



### LISA KRUGEL

Lisa works as both a stage manager and a stage designer.

Having graduated as an actor with a diploma in Speech and Drama from Dublin Institute of Technology in 2004, she found work (and on-the-job training) stage managing a show for The New Theatre which became a long-running touring production.

She returned to education to gain her Higher National Diploma in Technical Theatre from Inchicore College of Further Education in 2011. While there she re-ignited an early interest in set design which, after designing a few shows at Focus Theatre and The New Theatre, led her to becoming one of the first graduates of The Lir Academy's Master in Fine Art in Stage Design in 2014.

Lisa hopes to allow those often invisible behind the scenes to step out of the shadows, and to amplify their voices within Equity.



### DOROTHY LAITY

Dorothy Grace Laity works as a freelance actor, voice artist, theatre technician and film crew member in Ireland, the UK and Europe.

Her area of special interest is in promoting visibility and greater equality for performers, technicians, and crew who are disabled people. Her hope is to ensure that the voices of disabled colleagues are being properly heard. To achieve this, she will seek to ensure that our actions, at all times, promote confidence at all levels that during this time when the industry is beginning to make bold steps forward, that it is genuine, constructive and truly equal.



### YOUTH MEMBER: BRIAN Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN

Brían Ó Súilleabháin is a graduate of the Dublin Institute of Technology Conservatory of Music and Drama and has a First Class Honours BA in Drama Performance. He has trained at both the Gaiety School of Acting and Bow Street Academy. As an actor he has toured theatres across Ireland, Belgium, France, and Luxembourg, performing in productions of Shakespeare, children's theatre and contemporary Irish drama. He is a native Irish speaker, avid cyclist and an accomplished trombone player. As a new member of Equity, he hopes to serve as a strong voice for the concerns of young actors and performers.



# Brexit and the Arts in Northern Ireland

**Perfect storm: Brexit is hitting an already underfunded, undervalued theatre community reeling from the devastating effects of COVID 19 while we're attempting to creatively respond to the tail end of the difficult decade of centenaries.**

**Francis Mezza reports on the still unresolved impact of Brexit on the creative community in Northern Ireland.**

The ongoing Brexit debacle has caused fear and uncertainty for many and creative workers in the North of Ireland have been no different. In fact, some theatre and dance companies have been left wondering whether they can continue to tour internationally or work in collaboration with creative partners across our island.

At a recent meeting of UK Equity members in Northern Ireland, the distinction between 'goods' and 'services' in the Brexit Deal was highlighted by Equity staff member, Louise McMullan. At the moment, creative workers are classed as offering 'services' while sets, costumes, props and instruments are classed as 'goods'. This means that creative workers who normally transport equipment for work, such as musicians, must now pay to bring their instruments from the UK to the EU and vice versa. Worryingly, touring theatre productions might even have to find ways around transporting sets, costumes and props due to increased costs.

At the same meeting, where we were delighted to be joined by members of the Irish Equity Executive, the lack of a touring visa for artists was also highlighted as a major area of concern for creative workers

in the North. During recent negotiations, the UK government rejected an offer of visa-free travel for artists up to 90 days within the EU as this needed to be reciprocated for EU artists traveling to the UK. This means that Irish citizens (Irish passport holders) living in Northern Ireland can work in the EU as they are still EU citizens but British citizens (British passport holders) living in Northern Ireland cannot work in the EU without requiring short-term work-permits.



Francis Mezza

It should be noted that both British and Irish citizens can still move freely and work in either jurisdiction as the Common Travel Area, a long-standing arrangement between the UK and Ireland, pre-dates both British and Irish membership of the EU. Equity continues to lobby the UK government at Westminster on this issue and is calling on the prime minister to negotiate EU visa-free travel for creative workers, and for our European colleagues to be able to do the same in the UK.

Before Brexit, UK creatives were able to travel to Europe visa-free, but this is no longer the case. Some creative workers are having to pay hundreds of pounds just to be able to do their jobs and this creates a

unique situation for them in the North as some of us are still EU citizens but some of us are not. It all depends on which passport you have.

Some good news that has come out of this mess, however, has been that funding from the Irish government has guaranteed that students in Northern Ireland can still take part in the EU Erasmus Scheme and students with British passports also qualify.

In the meantime, UK Equity members in the North have been joined by the president of our union Maureen Beattie (who was born in Bundoran), Ian McKellen and Julie Walters in signing an open letter to the prime minister demanding that they go back to the negotiating table to ensure visa-free work in the EU for all of our

*Before Brexit, UK creatives were able to travel to Europe visa-free, but this is no longer the case*

members. Furthermore, the Irish Executive has also offered its support in helping in any way it can to resolve these issues. Both of our unions continue to work together to secure the best outcomes for artists across this island and long may that continue. We might have different passports here, but art knows no boundaries.

*Francis Mezza is a Northern Ireland based actor who has worked on stage and screen including in roles in Derry Girls (2018) and Seacht (2008).*

# THE SHOW WILL GO ON



Executive Producer of the Lyric Theatre, Jimmy Fay.

## **Jimmy Fay reports on the continued work of the theatre community in Northern Ireland and the new production by the Lyric, Sadie.**

It is now exactly a year since the Covid-19 virus closed all public spaces in Ireland and most of the world, including the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. Since 17th March last year, theatres have not been allowed to open to the general public in Northern Ireland. We still do not have a date for re-opening despite the positive news of the vaccination rollout on this side of the border. I don't think anybody could tell then, just how long this would continue or foretell quite how devastating the pandemic would be particularly to our industry and expose how vulnerable the freelance sector really is to such an unexpected ill wind.

The toll on all theatres is too unquantifiable to express accurately at this moment. What is evident is there will be a period of uncertainty for some time yet. Even if a date is announced soon by the Northern Ireland Executive for re-opening theatres it is not certain that the date will be achievable, or that audiences will be allowed to return in significant numbers. For the Lyric, the only full-time producing theatre in Northern Ireland, we rely on our audiences for a sizeable portion of our income. Planning, preparation and producing is of fundamental importance to the survival of the Lyric and we continue to do so during this period of high uncertainty.

Despite the very real gloom the Lyric is, in many positive ways, a hive of activity since April last year. Our achievements include New Speak one of the first original streaming works created in the pandemic and broadcast weekly last April, Seven short films called Splendid Isolation written, starring and directed by Northern Irish talent, which we produced with and

broadcast on the BBC last May; the digital co-production of Denouement, a brilliant new play by John Morton that deals with an ongoing apocalyptic moment in our future - curiously it was written before the pandemic - with the Traverse Theatre; the many audio productions of Listen at the Lyric. Our work with young people continued with Drama Studio, workshops and progressive lobbying for more public support for the vital role the Arts provide in Northern Ireland. In a typical year we employ up to 500 freelance artists and

*Even if a date is announced soon by the Northern Ireland Executive for re-opening theatres it is not certain that the date will be achievable*

with these initiatives we were able to employ over 300 freelancers during this crisis.

Our most significant production so far has been a startling new play, originally commissioned by Field Day Theatre Company, Sadie, by David Ireland. In many respects the format sounds normal - four weeks rehearsal, one-week tech and then production week. However, in this time, it has been extraordinary. Complying with on-going shifting Covid-19 guidelines was a mind-numbing headache that comes with producing in this time. Two of the actors had to self-isolate for the first ten days of rehearsals and conduct their rehearsal over Zoom.

I compared the process to a game of Russian Roulette - probably because I had recently watched The Deer Hunter - but as unfortunate as that phrase is that is how it

felt. Each week we awaited the results of the screening process and each week we added another potential carrier to the process. Had anyone of the cast or crew tested positive and we would have had to cancel the whole thing.

But we got there, and I am very grateful to everyone who worked on Sadie.

We have been able to produce this volume of work during this time because we have a full-time staff dedicated to the principles that govern the theatre to create, inspire and maintain. The success of the theatre, if you can call surviving and creating during a global pandemic a success, is down to the solid foundation of the Lyric staff.

In a way this activity has been what the Lyric has always been about since its foundation. Mary O'Malley was a very tenacious and determined leader. She literally created the Lyric out of her own imagination and brought people of different persuasions together in forging this great theatre on the banks of the Lagan. Famously, the Lyric never closed its doors even during the Troubles and that is one reason it still held in such high regard by her audience. Unfortunately, Covid-19 closed the doors to the public but, with the benefit of modern digital technology, we have still been able to offer our audiences, near and wide, some wonderful productions over the past year.

Sadie update -The filming of Sadie was completed at the end of February. The final cut I found provocative and astonishing. The direction and acting are first rate. The BBC broadcast the play on 31st March 31st on BBC4 and 1st April on BBC Northern Ireland. It is now available on BBC iPlayer.

*Jimmy Fay is Executive Producer of the Lyric Theatre*



# Doom, Gloom and Zoom



**Youth theatre has ably adapted and even found inspiration in the new normal writes Kel Menton of the Graffiti Theatre Company in Cork.**

It has fast become a cliché to acknowledge the state of the world we find ourselves in, and yet, I feel bad avoiding eye contact with the elephant in the room. So here it is: what a year it's been.

Anyone even vaguely familiar with the world of Irish theatre has felt its wonderful magic. I personally have reached a beautiful point where theatre – specifically, Graffiti Theatre Company – has been in my life longer than it has not. I thought I knew the ins and outs of its magic pretty well; this past year, though, has only proven that the people of Graffiti will never cease to bowl me over with the wonder they can pull from their bag of tricks. Even in the moments when our spines felt close to snapping under the weight of it all, Graffiti, like many theatre companies across the country, invoked Sorkin – “Okay. What’s next?” So though anxiety may paralyse us at times, it is increasingly difficult to miss the silver linings that have begun to engulf the clouds they frame. I am quite convinced that some sort of theatre-loving Rumpelstiltskin crept in during the night and taught everyone to spin silver from all the doom, gloom and Zoom. Again and again, when faced with a wall, we did not let each other say, “this is the end of our path”, but instead, “I wonder what the view is like from the top?”.

Lockdown life had barely established itself before the incredible people of Graffiti had begun to metamorphosise. Activate Youth Theatre adapted the piece they had been preparing, *Migrations*, into an online format. Playwright, Jody O’Neill, wrote a series *Cocoon*, which was performed by

Activate alum Amaya Gillespie, and uploaded onto Graffiti’s YouTube channel. Over the summer months, the youth theatres worked on a radio play; the professional theatre devised and developed *Trasna*, “a story of learning to navigate the strangeness of a new world” (apt, no?); and though *Lockdown: The Sequel* reared its ugly head, still, only a simple question was asked – “What’s next?”

None are so optimistic or hardy as the stellar members of the youth theatre, from the junior group all the way up to the seniors. For example, over the last six months, one of the senior groups has been adapting Cork author Cethan Leahy’s novel, *Tuesdays Are Just As Bad*, for the stage. We have had a few golden moments in the physical theatre space (with half of us present in person, and the other half on Zoom, projected onto the theatre wall!), but for the most part, the process has been done over Zoom! Here’s one of many silver linings on this dreary grey cloud: the learning that we’ll take forward, and the opportunities we have taken. We have made ample use of Google Docs, Jamboards, recordings, transcriptions, voice modulators – you name it, we have tried it, and the resulting script is our shiny proof of that.

When things were rocky post-Christmas, we had to confront the reality that our hard work may never see an audience. But the youth theatre members just shrugged – “So? We’ll make it anyway.” Just being together (even virtually), in the act of creation, is enough. We have been taught that we need to produce for consumption, but this process has just proved that sometimes we can make art for the sake of it. I’m telling you, the people of Graffiti are made of magic!

It hasn’t all been sunshine and rainbows, of course. The uncertainty of everything makes it difficult to put one foot in front of the other sometimes. We have helped each other over some pretty high walls, but there comes a point where your arms just ache too much. It’s good to push a little, and keep each other’s spirits up, but we’ve also learned the importance of rest. It’s okay to take a second to make eye contact with the elephant and see how bonkers the world is right now. And of course, to forgive yourself for your limitations; you can’t pour from an empty cup, and right now, there’s a big fat hole in the bottom of all of our mugs.

Often, it has been the smallest things that have really made me feel connected to the others at Graffiti, like sharing fond anecdotes of our memories at Youth Theatre Ireland’s “I Heart Youth Theatre” day or opening a Graffiti Christmas card. Small acts, but with huge impacts. It’s why we’re eagerly finding all of these ways to stay connected now, because we know that a better future is hurtling towards us, where we can more tangibly feel the magic we make together.

**For more  
information  
about Graffiti  
Theatre Company  
[www.graffiti.ie](http://www.graffiti.ie)**



# CREATING THROUGH COVID



Karen Gleeson

The pandemic opened up new possibilities in developing her creative career, writes Karen Gleeson.

**As a new mother, Covid-19 hit at the 'right time' for me. My son arrived in December 2019, just a few months before the world was forced to shut down. I was given an excuse to stay home with my new baby without any pressure or obligation to rush back to working on the next project. However, before Covid-19 and before I became pregnant, I was trying to make a comeback from a 'career ending' injury. I suffered an ankle injury a number of years previously and finally got the surgery but unfortunately it went wrong and I was left with nerve damage.**

Covid-19 and the lockdowns have given me the opportunity to take time out and assess my career and my approaches to movement.

I have spent my career pushing my body too far, for too long and not respecting my boundaries. For me, injuries just went with the territory but I always knew to keep it to myself for fear I would not be offered work if I was seen to be injury prone. Life as a freelance performer is one of uncertainty and you never know when your next project will be.

I have only recently begun to challenge myself on my belief that, unfortunately, "I can't dance anymore". I am only beginning to recognise how absurd that statement really is and how limiting and defeatist this attitude can be on my mental outlook. Just because I was once a fully able-bodied dancer, and now I am unable to move how I once used to but that does not mean that "I can't dance anymore". This has got me thinking about how I view myself, my career and my approaches to my work.

With the support of my Physio team, I began my exploration of dance again, but in a new way. I began to learn how to adapt, modify, move and accept my body and its new limitations to find "a new normal" and continue my career.

By chance, I was approached by writer Philip St John, who asked me to collaborate on a theatre show with him. He was interested in my story, and my career ending injury. At first I was afraid to share my misfortune as I felt embarrassed and ashamed to admit that my career had in fact ended. Dance is a career that does not allow for injuries.

Myself and Philip began our collaboration over Zoom and built a team of multi-disciplinary artists: Michael McCabe, Matthew Ralli, Dermot Marrey, Eoin Murphy and Melissa Nolan. We presented a short work-in-progress film online as part of the Wicklow Arts Offices Culture Night 2020. The work entitled, His Left, Her Right, focused on delving into the struggles and difficulties overcoming a career ending injury and its effect on the psyche.

The process in itself was a challenging one as the ever changing health restrictions meant we had to continuously change our approach, our location, our ability to work together in person and the outcome of our final presentation. The process really opened my eyes and gave me an insight into the struggles that we are all experiencing during the pandemic. As a community, we are being forced to continuously adapt.

The project, my process and my own struggle has given me the desire to help others who have similar challenges within the community.

In order to broaden my exposure, my professional network and knowledge, I am currently participating in a teacher training course in integrated dance education with the Stopgap Dance Company UK. The pandemic has actually made this easier, as it has enabled me to complete the course via Zoom workshops instead of travelling to the UK with a toddler.

The course will support me in up-skilling and building knowledge in dance and disability. My goal throughout my career has always been one of accessibility and inclusivity. I wish to engage and welcome a wider audience, including the physically diverse community. Participation in this course enables me to create inclusivity and accessibility in my creative and teaching work.

I am also currently continuing to work on another project entitled, Hear my Hands.

Hear my Hands is a multi-disciplinary collaborative performance piece, fusing dance, sign language, spoken word and audio video projection. The work explores the use of sign language and the use of movement as a form of communication. Delving into the frustration and difficulties involved with miscommunication in relationships.

Within the current pandemic restrictions, we, as a society have had to find new ways to communicate. This has had an effect on our relationships and on our mental health. The feeling of isolation and lack of connection has grown. It has changed how I approach my work and collaborations and will continue to do so into the future.

# EQUITY— HOW IT ALL BEGAN!



Gerry in Strumpet City plotting strike action with previous Equity President Vincent McCabe and Joe Cahill.



By Gerry O'Brien  
Equity President

**Equity, as a union of professional actors and stage managers was founded in New York in 1913 with 112 actors coming together to fight arbitrary work practices and low wages in the US theatre at that time. In 1919 it was accepted into The American Federation of Labour. In the same year Equity organised a major strike for recognition and was supported by the musicians and stage managers. This was known as the 'Revolt of the Actors', as a result its membership grew beyond their own expectations. From this industrial action they won a strong five-year contract with the Producing Managers Association. It is now a strong nationwide union for stage actors and theatre professionals in the US.**

In the 1930's Hollywood actors worked on exclusive contracts which tied them to the studios. They had little control over their careers with everything decided for them, from wages to how they conducted their private lives, they were the property of the studio and dared not complain or they would be suspended or blacklisted. In 1933 a round of studio salary cuts that affected everybody in the industry, including the contracted actors, became the motivation for the formation of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). A number of the actors involved were veterans of Equity's 'Revolt of the Actors' industrial action a few years earlier. In 1937 the first collective agreement between SAG and the studios was signed. This gave the less well-known

contract players some basic protections. However, in 1948 the Supreme Court in an anti-trust decision against Paramount studios ruled against the monopoly which had been held by the studios. The studio cartel system had been broken. Actors were now let loose to start negotiating their own terms. This is when SAG came into its own. Two years later, Jimmy Stewart negotiated his way into a percentage of 'Winchester '73's' box office grosses — or points on the back end, a practice which remains in place to this day. In the UK: British Actors Equity Association, now renamed 'Equity', was founded in 1929 by a group of West End actors to address the issues affecting actors and to regulate their professional standing within the industry. The union in the UK, unlike the US, remained unified and covers the employment of performers both in live work and in the film and television industry.

In Ireland: In 1947 Irish Actors Equity was formed. It emerged from the Writers, Actors and Musicians Association (WAAMA). One of its first negotiation successes was the contract for the RTÉ radio repertory company, and it tied the actors' salaries to that of the semi state civil service rate. This also helped set the

*In Ireland: In 1947  
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the Writers, Actors and  
Musicians Association*

salary scale for The Abbey Theatre Company.

In 1970 I took my first tentative steps as a freelance actor and in 1971 I convinced the legendary secretary of Irish Equity, Dermot Doolin, that I was in this for the long haul and I received my provisional Equity membership. I was now truly a 'professional actor'. This was my validation. I now belonged to a community of likeminded professionals.

The industry was very different in the 1970s and '80s. The 'closed shop' was in place and, in order to work, especially if you wanted to work in radio or television, you had to be a member of Equity. I became a company 'Equity rep.', for a number of theatre companies. The duties of an Equity rep. were to ensure that all cast members in a show were fully paid-up members of the union, to make sure we all had our tea breaks, and had the correct break between rehearsal and performance, all pretty run of the mill stuff. Then in 1975, as a result of European 'Common Market' policy, contract workers became entitled to holiday pay, and payment for working on bank holidays. I was Equity rep., for a company which was touring to Wexford when I received a phone call from the Equity office instructing me that unless I got an undertaking from the management that the cast would receive all such mandatory payments, we were to refuse to go on stage that night. This was my first experience of industrial conflict. The commercial company owners and theatre managers in Ireland opposed the idea of paying actors holiday pay. "They're not full-time employees, they're only part-time", "they're freelance self-employed", "we can't afford to pay actors more money" ... sound familiar?

Continued on next page

I learned later that this notice had gone out to all the companies on that same day. The threat of industrial action worked and the company, as did all commercial companies and theatre managers operating at that time, agreed to embrace the new regulations and Bank Holiday and holiday pay was introduced across the theatre sector.

*The industry was very different in the 1970s and '80s. The 'closed shop' was in place and, in order to work, especially if you wanted to work in radio or television, you had to be a member of Equity.*

As I gained more experience and my profile went up in the industry I worked more and more in television, and film. When I landed my first television series in RTÉ, I signed an equity contract that paid by the episode, this was in line with the practice in the UK. The RTÉ contract had a built-in residual payments clause for any extra transmissions, again in line with agreements in the UK. In the early years of television, the exploitation of a production was only for the island of Ireland. There was little or no sales abroad. Very few international films were made here. There were very few co-productions. In 1979 RTÉ filmed its most expensive and ambitious production ever, *Strumpet City*. They didn't know how it would translate to the screen or how it would be received abroad. However, they had to ensure that all the rights of the performers would be covered should they have any foreign sales. They looked to the UK contracts and used the early ITV UK equity contract. This meant that any future sales would result in residual payments for the actors. It was an international success and sold to over 50 countries. We all received residual payments a year later.

So, how did it come to be that from about the early nineties, all of the 'repeat fees', the 'back end' and 'residual' payments vanished from Irish performers contracts? In the late '80s the concept of the 'closed shop' union practice finally ended and Equity lost a great deal of its leverage. Add to this there was a falling off of experience within Equity itself. Actors who had worked in film and television and who had the experience of being involved in earlier

negotiations with the national broadcaster RTÉ and who had organised strike action against to gain better television contracts, were now less involved with the union. Many saw the end of the closed shop as the end of the need for a union and left Equity. The pool of experience for the executive declined. The section organisers from the then, Irish Transport and General Workers Union to which we had become affiliated in 1979, had little or no experience in the complex area of performers rights. Add to this mix the emergence of the independent film sector in Ireland, who were now beginning to dominate in the production of television drama for RTÉ. They were an extremely organised and well-resourced group and

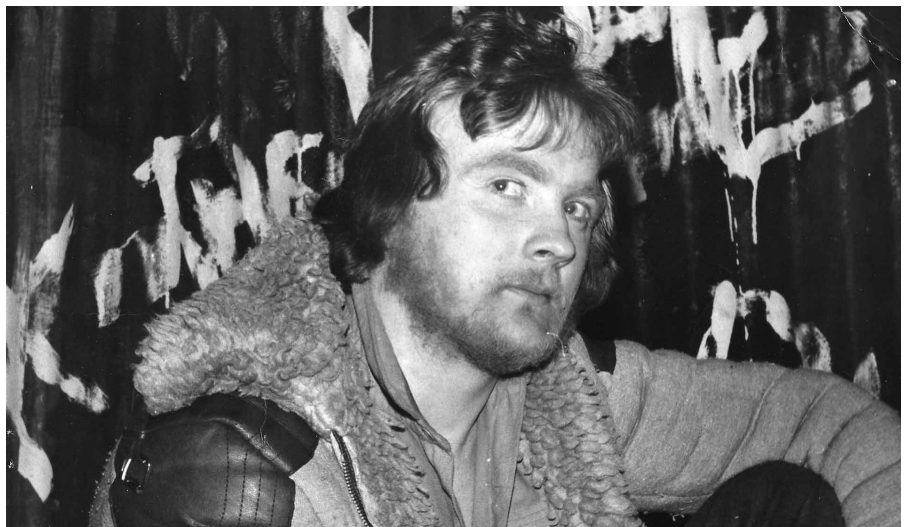
afforded to the performer. This was the 'buyout' agreement that all Irish performers have laboured under since then. This was when we finally became separated from our colleagues in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England.

Their agreement retained the right to equitable remuneration for the ongoing use of the actors' performance.

Their agreement was constantly renegotiated to take into account the rapidly changing distribution landscape.

The UK agreement grew with the industry.

This is where we failed. We have seen huge changes in the area of co-productions coming into this country, availing of tax breaks and local regional subsidies. The



*The opening show in Project Arts Centre when it moved to Essex Street in 1975.*

knew the intricacies of the industry, especially the value of copyright and intellectual property.

In the 1990s EU anti-competition laws began to take effect on the Union's ability to negotiate collective agreements for freelance actors, this was exploited to the full by organisations engaging performers. Throughout the 1990's there were a number of legal actions against the union that saw, for example, the removal of the union's influence in the area of supplying extras for the film industry and also curbing the union's ability to negotiate in the area of TV advertising and Voice Overs. However, the film industry needed an agreement that would provide them with some certainty when it came to casting drama productions for TV and film. They needed a form of words that would satisfy the legislation that offered protection to the performer and their own responsibility with regard to the copyright act. An agreement was negotiated that would satisfy the needs of the producers and appeared to comply with the protections

industry was no longer just about the domestic market it was about reaching out into a market with potential revenue streams valued in the tens of millions and distributed across numerous digital platforms. Our contract did not grow to facilitate the right of the performer to equitable remuneration for this volume of exploitation.

Where we are now: The Irish Equity Annual General Meeting (AGM) of 28th March 2021 demonstrated the frustration of actors at the failure of our negotiators to achieve an agreement that was fit for purpose in the face of these multiple distribution platforms and revenue streams that are generated by the exploitation of their performances.

What occurred at that AGM was amazing for me to watch. The members questioned the union. They educated themselves as to how contracts worked. They asked why they had to agree to inferior terms and conditions to any other performers working in this country on co-productions subsidised by our tax breaks, where those



performers import their union agreements. And they then rejected what was a flawed agreement. The members of Equity became a union, and they have charged the incoming President and Executive to listen to them, the members, and to respond to their concerns.

That is my brief.

Those are the only instructions that I and the Executive must heed.

I want to refer back to the history I shared at the top of this article. Equity came into existence through the efforts of 112 individuals coming together and saying they had enough. Within a short time, they had grown to 2,700 members in those early days in New York. It was the efforts of those early performers who changed the work practices not just for themselves but for every actor who followed them into their industry. Six actors came together in Hollywood in 1933 and began the journey that led to the formation of the Screen Actors Guild and began the struggle for the agreements they have today. It was not an easy struggle.

The motto of the Screen Actors Guild is what unifies all workers in gaining fairer terms and condition, He best serves himself who serves others. That is my guiding principle. Equity members must serve the next generation, the young student entering a drama school, the

individual who begins a film acting course, and to ensure their rights are protected. By fighting for those who are the most vulnerable to the worst aspects of the exploitative nature of this industry we become stronger ourselves.

The union is only as strong as its membership. The greater the membership the better the seat at the table, the louder

*The union is only as strong as its membership. The greater the membership the better the seat at the table*

the voice speaking on behalf of the weakest. No one individual will affect the change in our workplace that is necessary, but every actor in this country working together will.

I will finish on this. A quote from an actor who turns up at union meetings and lends his voice to the demands of his union when they are fighting for the rights of those young performers who are starting out on their careers:

"Membership means more than these obvious advantages. It reflects the nature of our work which is a collective enterprise, where we all depend on each other. It is of course in only the employers' interests that we employees should be without the protection of the union's experience and strength".

**Sir Ian McKellen**

**Join the Union.  
Join the Fight.  
Support your  
Executive.**

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Take the lead from your fellow professionals, watch the video below.

We are Irish Equity



# MAKING RELAXED PERFORMANCE WORK

*Jody O'Neill, an autistic writer, actor and advocate, writes on her experience of making theatre an experience for everyone.*

**Over the past number of years, it's been heartening to see that more and more venues are offering relaxed performances or sensory friendly screenings for neurodiverse children. However, autistic children grow up to be autistic adults and you don't generally see sensory-friendly screenings or relaxed performances for adults.**

Many autistic people choose not to attend theatres or concert venues, even galleries, because of the risk of anxiety they may experience. They may not be aware that an accessible experience is even possible. In making *What I (Don't) Know About Autism* from writing to development to rehearsals, tech and production, we tried to always work with accessibility in mind.

Early in the process, through the Home Theatre Ireland programme run by the Draíocht Arts Centre, I had the experience of writing a short play for a man called Mark who is a service user at a disability day service in West Dublin. One of the things I discovered about Mark on the very first day we spent together was that every time people clap, he gets a fright, and his body has a physical reaction to the sound. This got me thinking – I didn't want to create a performance that would make Mark physically uncomfortable or cause him stress in any way.

The answer was really simple. I wrote into the play script some instructions and requests for the audience. I developed the play so that I had a relationship with

the audience both as performer/guide and as character.

So, towards the end of the play, I would say ask the audience not to clap and explain that instead of clapping, we could have a cup of tea or a chat after the performance. While this created an unusual experience for some audience members, I'm pretty sure it didn't frighten anyone, or cause them physical shock, which is what applause would have done for Mark.

When it came to writing *What I (Don't)*

*Many autistic people choose not to attend theatres or concert venues, even galleries, because of the risk of anxiety they may experience*

*Know About Autism*, I used this experiment with relaxed performance as a template, and because I was working with several other autistic actors as the development process evolved, we were able to discuss areas where we felt a signal or warning to the audience might be important and adjust the text as we went.

The very beginning of the play is an address to the audience. The actors enter and stand very close to the front of the stage. We explain that this is a relaxed performance, that if people need

to leave during the performance that's okay and that if they want to come back in again, that's okay too. We reassure them that the houselights will remain on at a low level throughout the show. We give permission for audience members to make noise or move around during the performance, and we ask other audience members not to shush anyone who does make noise. We reassure the audience that any sudden lighting or sound effects will be flagged by the actors in advance, and also offer ear defenders to anyone who might need them.

We point out two flipcharts that are located towards the front of the stage and have the names of the 26 scenes of the play written on them. We explain that after each scene, we will cross out the name of that scene to help the audience to keep track of how long has passed and how long is still to go. We also give an approximate running time for the show.

This introduction sets the audience up for how the rest of the play will go, and how the relationship between audience and actors will unfold. The result, I think, is a kind of collective exhale. The audience knows what to expect and the actors have had a chance to get a sense of who is in the audience tonight. Everyone's presence is acknowledged. The 'rules' of the game have been set out and we are all ready to play.

Around the performance itself, there were other supports that we developed with our production partners. Every performance was captioned, thanks to

our set designer, Medb Lambert. Working with the Abbey and Arts and Disability Ireland (ADI), one performance of the show was Irish Sign Language interpreted and an audio-described performance was made available.

We offered autism training with Ireland's National Autism Charity, AslAm, for anyone working on the production. We provided briefings for front of house staff around accommodations that might be required. A visual guide was developed and made available to audiences for download in advance.

To accommodate the cast, we structured

*“one autistic person is one autistic person” so, each person will have different needs and what you are trying to do is cater for as broad a range of needs as possible*

when communicating with autistic performers during tech.

One important thing I'd like to stress is

and create a welcoming space. That's how access can begin.

This article was adapted from a panel presentation called 'On Demand vs On Request Access', which was part of From Access to Inclusion – An Arts and Culture Summit hosted by Arts and Disability Ireland in March 2021.

For more details of the event see: <https://adiarts.ie/summit/>

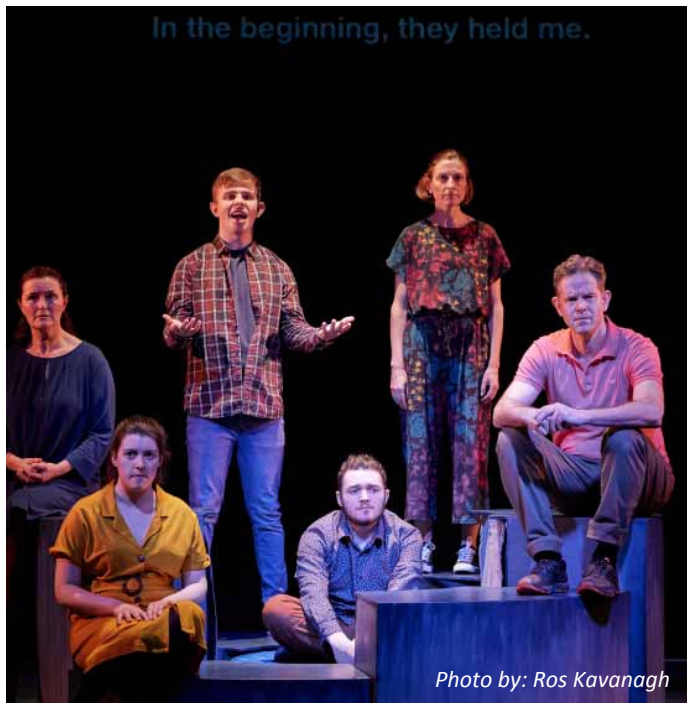


Photo by: Ros Kavanagh

## From Access To Inclusion

An Arts and Culture Summit

*To accommodate the cast, we structured our rehearsal process and room to try to avoid triggering sensory overload*

our rehearsal process and room to try to avoid triggering sensory overload. Led by our director, Donal Gallagher, we teched the show differently; crucially, most of the tech took place without the actors. We briefed tech staff on considerations

the fact that we always had in mind that “one autistic person is one autistic person” so, each person will have different needs and what you are trying to do is cater for as broad a range of needs as possible. The way to do this, in keeping with the maxim “nothing about us without us” and if you're trying to make an event accessible to a certain group, is to not make assumptions about what their needs might be. Consult with them, involve them in the process - they are the experts and their insights will give you the best possible chance of success. But don't wait for autistic people to request or demand access, because a negative past experience may have wrongly taught them that the arts are not for them. Extend an invitation

**What I (Don't) Know About Autism** was co-produced with the Abbey Theatre, in association with Mermaid County Wicklow Arts Centre and The Everyman. It was funded by the Arts Council, Wicklow County Council and Dublin City Council. It will return for live and streamed performances in late 2021. To stay updated, join the Abbey Theatre's mailing list <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/abbey-theatre-mailing-list/>



# THE STAGE LIGHTS STAY LIT IN SLIGO



Maeve McGowan writes about the last year of lockdown in Sligo.

**As events unfolded in March 2020 dozens of events at the Hawk's Well Theatre were postponed and then cancelled, as the scale of Covid-19 pandemic grew. For a venue, with six fulltime and many part-time and casual staff that thrive on interaction with customers, suppliers, performers and supporters, it was a bitter pill to swallow.**

However, the show must go on, and behind the scenes, this past year has seen some incredible successes for Sligo's cultural centre, which is due to celebrate its 40th anniversary in 2022.

Nothing compares to the magic of live performance and we really miss all of the wonderful local and touring performers who come through our doors. However, since lockdown we have embraced the virtual space and have worked hard at engaging with audiences online.

With the first lockdown changing everything, the theatre got into action, with online events beginning almost as soon as its doors closed with a daily lockdown sing-song from Cathy Jordan, followed by lunchtime tunes from Oisín MacDiarmada. Come Together: The Isolation Collective saw ten new pieces of work created virtually as the theatre paired ten local theatre artists with ten local musicians to work collaboratively online.

Themed Programming such as 12 Days Of Christmas and With Love From Sligo provided a digital stage and commissions for sixty artists.

In a real display of community spirit, in July 2020, local writer Brian Leyden was commissioned to write a poem about the theatre, for a piece that was eventually performed in the venue by socially distanced groups. The resulting Poem for the People brought into verse the magic of live theatre. Community participation was to the fore again in the theatre's virtual

*The show must go on, and behind the scenes, this past year has seen some incredible successes for Sligo's cultural centre*

choir, Sligo Sings. Led by choirmaster Dave Flynn they took on the feelgood classic White Christmas. Shoppers on the main O'Connell Street were surprised by singers performing from the windows of the local pub, Hargadons.

Schools enjoyed a special streamed performance produced by the theatre with

Christmas Toons featuring local band Anything Goes beamed into 75 classrooms across the county.

The theatre's workshops moved online with 145 participants learning new creative skills such as comedy writing, acting and singing. The switch to online was challenging for both tutors and course participants but every course was full, catering to the demand for learning in lockdown.

Meanwhile, The Hawk's Well's own cultural companions' initiative, set up in 2019 as a network of like-minded people, who can accompany each other to cultural events - blossomed into Come Together - The Cultural Companions Collective. Bringing together four performing artists with four cocooning older people to create four exciting new works, this resulted in the January 2021 The Diary Entries, which aired via a special streaming event as part of the First Fortnight Festival.

A year ago, the theatre had never streamed a show. Now a year on it has collaborated with many festivals and streamed many shows. This year Creating CONSTANCE shared an intimate look behind the scenes of its most ambitious project to date; the Hawk Well production CONSTANCE about Constance de Markievicz, directed by Kellie Hughes. Creating CONSTANCE aired as part of the



Countess Markievicz

actor Mikel Murfi on a couple of exciting projects.

Thanks to a Trad Arts Commission from the Arts Council the theatre has also commissioned work on a new suite of music, *Eva*, which celebrates Constance de Markievicz's equally brilliant sister Eva Gore-Booth. Theatre artist Kellie Hughes is collaborating with composer/musician Stephen Doherty to develop this exciting new work.

It's incredible that these artists have actually been able to work together and get this project off the ground as Kellie was working in San Francisco when the pandemic hit and has been working between there and Dublin since, while Stephen lives in the West of Ireland, but it is wonderful how innovative artists can be. We look forward to seeing the fruits of this labour when we can eventually bring artists together on stage to perform live once more in front of an audience. How wonderful will that be!

IMBOLC Festival in February.

Our focus this year is on working with artists. Through our short Time at the Well residencies, we are delighted to be working with local actor Niamh McGrath who is writing a play about a girl in a bubble of one. We have also been working with local actor Miriam Needham who has developed

her play *Snapshot* in virtual collaboration with other local artists over the last few months. Both theatre artists are exploring this strange time we are all living through in their own unique way and we look forward to sharing their work with our audiences whether online or live over the next while. We are also working with Sligo

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*Maeve McGowan currently Acting Director at the Hawk's Well Theatre where she has been working for almost ten years as Marketing Manager. Director Marie O'Byrne is on maternity leave. Maeve tells us about the last year of lockdown in Sligo.*

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# What **Universal Basic Income** is and could mean for workers in the Arts

## What Is Universal Basic Income?

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a proposed government-guaranteed payment that each citizen receives.

The definition of UBI in the Arts and Culture Task Force Report, published by the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht in November 2020, is that: "UBI is an unconditional state payment that each citizen receives. The payment is designed to provide enough to cover the basic cost of living and provide a modicum of financial security. All other income would then be earned separately and subject to taxation."

## How does it affect the Arts?

The provision of a UBI was part of the Programme for Government. In addition, the Arts and Culture Recovery Task Force recommended that UBI be implemented on the basis of a three-year pilot scheme for people working in the Arts.

If implemented, what will it mean for people employed in the Arts?

## From Appendix of the Arts and Culture Task Force

**Report:** "The proposed mechanism for rolling out the Universal Basic Income (UBI) could be through the establishment of a pilot project as envisaged in the Programme for Government which would last three years. The pilot could involve an unconditional state payment paid at the level of national minimum wage (€10.20 per hour from January 2021). This payment would be in lieu of an alternative primary weekly social welfare payment. All other income would then be earned separately and subject to taxation at the marginal rate.

"Secondary social welfare payments currently held on the basis of needs, e.g. rent supplement, or non-weekly payments (such as child benefit or domiciliary care

allowance) would also be retained. The Scheme should be suitable for both employed and self-employed workers in the sector.

"The scheme could be 'opt-in' and artists, creatives and other cultural workers who don't opt in can be used as a control group against which to measure the pilot. There is evidence from existing statistics that artists on the Professional Artists Social Protection Scheme returned to work at a faster pace than workers on the general Jobseekers payment.

## The following are proposed as key features of the UBI:

- The setting of the level of payment at the level of the national minimum wage
- No means test requirement to take part in the pilot UBI."

Irish Equity is seeking to ensure that the pilot is reflective of your needs, as Equity members, and will be seeking active engagement with other stakeholders to secure this.

## When is it going to take effect?

There are multiple reports with even more recommendations gathering dust on shelves and we need to ensure that this UBI recommendation does not become one of them. At the moment, there is no definitive road map as to when and how it will be implemented.

## What is Irish Equity doing to ensure implementation?

We have set up a petition which is available on our web page (<https://irishequity.ie/universal-basic-income-for-the-arts/>). When sufficient numbers have signed it, we will present it to the Minister and seek a roadmap for implementation. UBI itself may not be enough but it must meet the needs of our members who work in this precarious industry.

## What can I do?

This is where you come in. If you have yet to sign the petition, you need to do this now. You should also encourage others to do so as well. Talk to family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, all of your social media contacts. We must generate an active campaign. So, this is up to you.

- We all also need to ensure political representatives are aware that we are not accepting a return to the 'old normal' once the restrictions lift.
- We are seeking greater income protection from the precarious nature of work in the Arts.
- We are seeking greater opportunities for Equity members to undertake the work they cherish rather than the work they are forced to do.

You should seek a meeting with your local TDs to ensure that they are aware that the implementation of this pilot scheme is vital. Equity representatives are happy to attend the meeting with you where required and if possible, but it is important for your local political representatives to be aware that this is a crucial matter for you and the level of progress or otherwise might influence your vote. The voice of a local constituent in this regard is much more powerful than that of a non-constituent.

It is quite simple. If politicians don't believe this is an important issue for you, it will not be an important issue for them. They will respond much more pro-actively to direct contact, such as a phone call, than to email which they might not even see. We all need to make our voices heard, individually and collectively.

Let's make it impossible for them to ignore the very real needs of people in our industry.





Felicia Olusanya. Photo by: Ros Kavanagh

Felicia Olusanya (aka FELISPEAKS) is a Nigerian-Irish Poet, Performer, Playwright from Co. Longford, based in Maynooth town. She is currently featured on the Leaving Certificate English Curriculum with her poem 'For Our Mothers' for examination year 2023. FELISPEAKS was commissioned by RTE in 2020 with the poem *Still* about Ireland's response to the COVID pandemic.

# STILL

By Felicia Olusanya

COVID came.  
And Ireland stood still.  
Shocked at how much could gather at our doorsteps

- like dust.  
We wrestled with what we might,  
What we may,  
How life would continue, the ways it must.

Stood still.  
The virus ate through limbs of every family tree, It choked out the lives we'd built roots around,  
It emptied out purses; cutting money by the foot, Rendered hearts bruised and persons forgotten, Left us breathless. For dead.

Still.  
We closed into ourselves.  
We folded behind lock and key,  
Inhaled through the fogs of uncertainty,  
We found fun in the walls of our homes,  
Made it work,  
Fashioned it for play,  
Carved out sections we can fill joy with,  
So we can hold it firm on the days we didn't know what we next, what could happen.

Still.  
For those whom age had known beyond a golden jubilee, whose eyes glaze with filmreel memories, whose daughters have vowed to love them in their sunset, whose sons have kissed them in their sunrise. We want your vision of us in full colour.

Stood still.  
For the emerging minds that must dare to dream in high definition, and the universities echoing with

For the lovely minds that are glaring at love through a screen, For the bodies that create homes in cardboard shelters.

Still.

For you.

Ireland is standing still.

But tomorrow, when our knees get soft with impatience and the gates of our homes swing open,  
Which way will our legs go? Which path does our heart know?

# Irish Equity

## Film and Entertainment Quiz

- 1) Name the day player who was nominated for an academy award and a golden globe for their work on a film shot in Ireland?
- 2) What Irish person has the most Oscar wins?
- 3) What year did the Irish Film Censor's Office drop censorship from its remit and was renamed the Irish Film Classification Office?
- 4) What famous Dublin pub is the local boozier of choice for Christy Brown's father in My Left Foot?
- 5) What theatre was the first state subsidised theatre in the English speaking world?
- 6) Name the four Irish writers who won the Nobel prize for literature?
- 7) An Irish guy first developed the technique of creating sound effects on film in the 1920s, a job we know as a Foley Artist. What was his name?
- 8) The modern Globe Theatre has a capacity of 1,400. What was the capacity of Shakespeare's original Globe Theatre?
- 9) What is the shortest play ever written?
- 10) When was the Project Arts Centre founded?

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by 5.00 p.m. on  
30th June 2021.**

Should there be more than one correct entry, the winner will be randomly selected from the correct entries.

*SIPTU/Equity staff and their families are excluded from entry as are members of the Equity Executive and their families.*



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