

THEATRE SHOP CONFERENCE 2004

Friday 1st October

PLENARY SESSION

10.15 – 11.30am

Pursuing an Independent Artistic Vision

Three established Irish artists discuss working within and without the constraints of the traditional company structure. Followed by Q&A.

Chair: *Caitríona Crowe – Archivist, Community Development activist and reviewer for The Sunday Tribune.*

Speakers: *Jane Brennan, actor and co-founder of B*spoke Theatre Co; Michael Keegan Dolan, choreographer and director of Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre; Dónal O'Kelly, actor and writer.*

Jane Daly: I would just like to introduce Caitríona Crowe, the chair of this discussion. Caitríona is a highly respected archivist whose support of our own Irish Playography Project is very valuable. She is in fact, I'm glad to say, on the board of Theatre Shop. She is also a community development activist and a regular reviewer for RTÉ Radio's arts program *Rattlebag* and for The Sunday Tribune.

I'm very pleased that she has made herself available to chair this session with three of our leading artists. So with no more delay I'll invite Caitríona to kick off this year's Theatre Shop. Thank you very much.

Caitríona Crowe: Thank you Jane. The theme of our keynote session this morning is Irish artists pursuing an independent artistic vision within and without the constraints of the traditional company structures. We're very lucky to have three very distinguished individuals with us here to share their thoughts on this matter.

There are advantages to going outside the mainstream in terms of the liberation of being able to choose your own material, devise your own material, and often, if you're working on your own, do whatever you like, which is not something that can apply

within the traditional structures. But there are also disadvantages; one of the main ones, I would imagine we are going to hear about, being funding.

Elizabeth Bowen, the Anglo-Irish writer said that relations between England and Ireland were a mixture of showing off and suspicion worse than sex. It's possible that relations between the Arts Council and artists can sometimes be a little bit like that. Today, I know we have sympathetic and interested Arts Council ears in the audience, and other people who can be helpful in these matters. I hope that we're going to be able to come up with perhaps a few suggestions for how to mediate that relationship in a more flexible way that will be useful to all of you who are working in the independent sector.

Now, our three participants are going to talk to you for between five and ten minutes in an informal sort of way. This is, I hope, going to be an informal session; I want as much participation as possible from yourselves.

I asked them yesterday to look at four questions that they might pursue in the course of their talks. The first one is why they are doing what they're doing. Why choreograph amazing dance programs, as Michael Keegan Dolan does. Why go into setting up your own company and producing a play once a year, as Jane does. And why tour Ireland in one-man shows, I'm sure often under seriously bad conditions, as Dónal does. So there are reasons for all of this that they are going to share with us and tell us, I think, something about the advantages of doing it, and what their artistic vision is, which is after all what all this is about. We'll be talking a lot about structures and funding and so on, but nothing happens without somebody having the ideas and the energy and the artistic talent to put these things into place.

Second question is what structures, if any, they have put in place to support their artistic vision? Do they have an administrative back up? Is there a producer working with them? How do they manage with things like venues? All of those issues which arise constantly.

Third, and importantly, how are they funded? Is it public funding, private funding, or a mixture of the two? What are the constraints on trying to raise funding from the public sector and, again, from the private sector, which can be almost a full time job, trying to raise funding on an annual basis in that kind of way.

Lastly, what can they suggest that might improve the situation for them? What steps can be taken apart from a huge increase in the Arts Council grant, and money being given out willy-nilly? Practical, possible things that can be done to improve the situation for people in the independent sector. Again, I know that the people from the Arts Council who are here will be listening to all of that.

We're going to go in alphabetical order, starting with Jane Brennan. Jane is one of Ireland's leading actresses, as I'm sure you all know. I particularly remember her playing Constance Wilde in Tom Kilroy's wonderful play about Constance Wilde; an absolutely extraordinary performance. She's been acting for many, many years and is highly distinguished in her field. In 2002 she and Alison McKenna set up B*spoke Theatre Company and their first production was Frank McGuinness's version of *Electra*, which went on in the Project Arts Centre in 2002. In 2003, a version of *The Drunkard* by Tom Murphy was produced, and toured around the country quite considerably. Their most recent production has been David Mamet's *Boston Marriage*, a wonderful production in the Project. So Jane is going to talk to you about what that experience has meant to her, and share with us what the difficulties and the liberations are.

Jane Brennan: I'd just like to thank Theatre Shop for inviting us here first of all. We're very honoured. I'm going to start with a quote:

'And therefore, when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen who are so clever that they can imitate anything comes to us and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being, but we must also inform him that in our state such as he are not permitted to exist. The law will not allow them. And so when we have anointed him with myrrh and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him away to another city.'

I'll just let that hang there for a while. See what you make of it.

B*spoke Theatre Company is made up of two people, Alison McKenna and myself. We are a company limited by guarantee, and we have an administrative consultant, Martin Fahy. We were formed in 2002, as Cairíona has said, and we've produced three shows: *Electra*, *The Drunkard* and *Boston Marriage*. We have no office,

just a laptop and a mobile phone. We are not funded, as yet, by the Arts Council, so god knows what city, if any, we'll end up in.

I was at an event recently where I got into a conversation with someone who was asking me about the company and what we were doing. They concluded the conversation by congratulating me and saying what an amazing innovation it was for actors to be running their own company. Now, this well-intentioned person had been a member of the previous Arts Council. I pointed out that historically, actually, this had been the norm from Shakespeare, to David Garrick, to Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammoir, to David Parnell. Most of the great companies of the world have been founded and run by artists, from the Comédie Française, to the Moscow Arts, to Steppenwolf, and here in Ireland from the Abbey and the Gate, to Operating Theatre. This encounter highlights one of the main reasons why I personally felt the need to start a company.

Our conversations on the idea started at the end of 2001. There was a strange feeling at the time that artists were slipping off the arts agenda. There was an overall sense of isolation, of being marginalised. The professionalisation of administration had become the priority and not the artistic work. It is no coincidence that the Association of Theatre Artists (ATA) emerged at around the same time, stemming from the same prevailing mood. In a few short years it has become a seemingly extraordinary notion that artists could run their own company. Of course every company needs professional administration, but putting this as the priority before the artistic vision is putting the cart before the horse. There are funded theatres in this country with no artistic direction. I believe that every theatre should have an artistic vision and that the administrative structure should fit around that. Otherwise it's just a waste of money.

B*spoke's artistic vision is to try and explore different styles of theatre using the actor as the starting point, as the inspiration for the work we would choose. To tailor our productions to the actor – hence “bespoke” – and choose plays that would offer challenging opportunities with specific actors in mind, casting them in a way that they might not normally be seen. Also, nurturing new talent. Our canon of work aims to be surprising and eclectic.

We discovered fairly quickly how difficult it is to pursue an independent artistic vision without the traditional structures. We fall between two stools. We're neither mainstream nor fringe. We don't have the resources of mainstream companies, and we are frankly too old, too tired and too talented, as they say, to work for purely intellectual and spiritual stimulation as recompense. We cannot create on a shoestring. We have arrived at degrees of artistry and wish to go further. We need resources to allow us to do that. To produce work to the expected standard. We are embarrassed to continue to ask people to subsidise us by working for a fraction of their worth, and a fraction of what people starting out in other professions would earn.

If you need Arts Council funding, as you do, you are required to have certain structures in place, which is understandable to a certain extent, but it can be a catch 22. For example, we cannot afford an administrator. You need money to set up certain structures. A degree of flexibility should be considered.

Operating Theatre, Olwen Fouère and Rodger Doyle's company are a good example of how a company that's not traditionally structured can work within the system. They don't keep producing work simply to justify their existence. They have used funding to develop the work. They are driven by a very particular artistic vision. They have a producer who also produces elsewhere, but who has stayed with the company and understands their particular vision and remit. Their administrative structure fits around their artistic one, in other words. They were many, many years in existence however, before they actually received revenue funding.

We have, so far, raised our funding from private sponsorship and investment, Dublin City Council, and the Alternative Arts Council, as they've come to be known, Abhann Productions. We spend a lot of our energies on this end of things, but you can't rely on goodwill forever. Begging is ultimately humiliating. Theatre Forum are encouraging people to lobby for a much bigger increase in government funding to the Arts Council. This is absolutely necessary, because otherwise they will be merely robbing Peter to pay Paul to fund and support newer companies like ours. If they don't deliver there will be no new emerging companies and therefore 'when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen who are so clever that they can imitate anything comes to us and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as

a sweet and holy and wonderful being, but we must also inform him that in our state such as he are not permitted to exist. The law will not allow them. And so when we have anointed him with myrrh and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him away to another city.'

And that was written almost two and a half thousand years ago by Plato.

Caitriona Crowe: I think Jane raised a lot of very pressing concerns there that we will be addressing in the discussion afterwards. Our next presenter is Michael Keegan Dolan, choreographer, who was trained at the Central School of Ballet in London, and has been choreographer for the Royal Opera Ballet, and many other major companies in Britain. In fact he has lived in Britain since 1988 and, I believe, just moved back here and is currently building a house as we speak. Not right now, but has come from doing it down in Westmeath. So you're very welcome back to Ireland, Michael.

For last year's Theatre Festival he presented *Giselle*, which was a radical re-working of the classical ballet. Very, very well received. I unfortunately missed it as I was telling him this morning, and many people couldn't get tickets to it. It was a sell-out show and very, very popular at the time. Fabulous Beast is the company, and was set up in 1997 and has four other award-winning productions to its credit: *The Flowerbed*, *Fragile*, *The Good People* and *Sunday Lunch*. So Michael is now going to tell us what it's like being a choreographer in the independent sector.

Michael Keegan Dolan: Hello, good morning. I haven't made any notes, so I must apologise. I came here in the hope that what would come out of my mouth would be the most pertinent and informed and wise information possible. But that always isn't the case, as I'm sure you'll both agree, in this situation. As I'm about to demonstrate. I think, I guess, I was in denial about what this actually is, and then suddenly you arrive here and there's a whole load of people and there's a theatre and some lighting and a microphone. So my heart is going like [*taps microphone*] and I'm trying to stay cool and talk about what I'm here to talk about. So I hope you can give me some guidance if I go off on one.

Obviously, what Jane was just talking about is a very emotional subject for artists but it's no use being emotional when you're dealing with funding organisations, or producers, or festival organisers, or actually even with artists. It's not much use being emotional, because it just gets in the way. I think the best advice I ever got relating to this area was from Gaye Tanham, who used to work for the Dance department of the Arts Council, who just once looked me straight in the eye and told me to take the emotion out of it. You know, because I was getting very red-faced. You've got to be very careful of the emotion.

Caitriona rang me yesterday and gave me some points that maybe I should talk about to keep it on the straight and narrow. The first was why do you do what you do, which is such a fantastic question for anyone doing what we do, because I think most of us don't know why we're doing what we do. You somehow fall into it, or your mother made you do it, and you wanted to be loved by her so you started doing it. That's definitely part of why I do what I do. You want to be heard, you want to be loved, you want to be recognised. Unfortunately when you go to an Arts Council meeting and they smell from you that desire to be loved and recognised and needed, they can work you. They can manipulate you. If you need the money, god, you've no power. So what I've learned to do, and I kind of meditate on it is: I don't need this money, I don't need this company, I don't need this festival, I don't need these performers, I don't need anything. I'll be ok without it. Because you're very vulnerable, as I'm sure you'll both agree. You're in a very vulnerable position because you're asking to take your insides out and put them on a stage for everyone to come and look at, and talk about, and say 'That was great' or 'That was shit'. And you're going to ask for money to do that. Which is funny, like 'Can I have €100,000 to expose my innermost subconscious workings?'. So these are the kind of things that were going through my head when Caitriona asked me why I do what I do.

The more esoteric answer, and the more sophisticated one is – and you hear people say this all the time – 'I really believe in the power of theatre'. I really do believe in it, and it's so badly served in not just Irish society. Because I've lived in London for fifteen years, so I feel I'm more familiar with that world. But, here's an interesting point: a lot of Irish artists come to me and say 'oh, here in Dublin it's all so closed', or 'here in

Dublin the Arts Council's crap'. It's not Dublin, it's everywhere. It's London, it's New York, it's Paris, it's Germany, it's all just slightly different. I do believe in the transformative power of theatre, and we are all being very much short-changed as audience members. Not to get too much on my high horse, but I do think when you get it right as a director, as a creator, as an artist, it is the most transformative, wonderful experience that you can experience as a sentient being. Much more powerful than film or television. It's a wonderful thing. It's transformative for the people creating, it's transformative for the people participating and performing, and it's transformative for the audience. You feel different after you see a wonderful piece of theatre, and it can sometimes change your entire life. So that's why I think I continue doing what I'm doing, in spite of all the crap that you have to deal with.

You shouldn't complain about it [*working independently*] too much because you can go and work for companies. I get offered work all the time as a movement director, as a choreographer. I think it's very exposing when a director asks you to be their movement director. It displays the huge chasm in the psyche of our theatre directors. They'll employ me, kind of like a whore, to come in and fix the movement. And I don't get that. If it's happening in the brain it should be happening in to body too. I used to do this as a living, and I'd come in and I'd go up to the actors, going 'if you do this you'll look more believable'. But it should happen all together. You shouldn't need a movement director. So I got sick of doing all that.

I sometimes choreograph ballets and operas to pay for my house that I'm trying to build in Westmeath. A very close friend of mine said to me recently you can't keep doing that Michael, because you become a complete asshole when you work for other directors. I was really shocked, I was really upset, and he was right because when you're an artist with a misguided, or guided, feeling that you have something very important to share with an audience, you feel like you're not being honest when you work for other directors or big companies. There's such an agenda. You have to do what they want for them, and they'll always try and kid you that it's your work. But really if it's good, it's their work, quickly. It's a Royal Opera House production. I had an interesting experience where I choreographed the Valpurgis Act ballet in *Faust* at the Royal Opera House. It was a success so on the BBC broadcast the commentator said 'here we have the

Valpurgis Act ballet. It's staged here tonight by the director David McVicar'. You know, *I* choreographed the thing and *I* conceived the thing, but there was no mention of me. Now that's my ego being affronted, I'm upset because my ego wasn't sated. But on a deeper level it's not me, it's not my work. I can't control it. I'm a control freak.

Moving on. The structures I have in place. The control freak thing is really interesting, and it's not easy to come to terms with that idea when you're an artist. You're supposed to be soft and open and lunar, but if you're too soft and open and lunar in an Arts Council meeting, you won't get anywhere. The problem is that to survive in this ambiance you have to get very hard, very masculine, and very linear to get your money, to get this, to get that, and then art gets destroyed in the process. You become an administrator.

Jane Brennan: You're wasting your energies.

Michael Keegan Dolan: Well, you're using your creative energy for all sorts of other stuff. To be able to survive in the world that I've created for myself, you need to have both. You need to be able to be an artist, but you need to be able to go and sit down and say 'now, this is what I'm doing; I need this, this and this. Don't mess with me. I've got to have that.' That's the trick if you like.

So I'm a bit of a control freak. I've come to accept that. Now a control freak artist needs people to work with them. I need a company manager, I need a production manager, I need a producer. I need to empower them. So I have a company manager, I have a production manager. There are festival directors who are supporting me. There's a production company in London who are supporting me. You have to really learn to trust these people. It's very difficult. You have to give them an awful lot of power. I've a fairly bad reputation for how I interface with people; company managers and production managers. I've thought about this for a long time, and it's something to do with you don't trust them entirely. You have to get to know people very well before you can give them your art to sell, in some ways, on an international or a national circuit. You have to really, really trust them.

Making the kind of work I make in Ireland is particularly challenging because I don't make pieces with just a roll of Harlequin dance floor and a couple of guys in suits. I make work with sets, with lighting, pieces that require long rehearsal periods. I make pieces on large canvases so I need big rehearsal spaces. Ireland does not have much of a developed infrastructure to support the kind of work I make. So a lot of my funding just goes to put in place the infrastructure that in another country would already be there. I did a very interesting experiment last April. I revived *Giselle* in Vienna because nothing was available here for me. There was no space big enough available for long enough. You can't store your sets in most places in Dublin because the karate guys are coming in at five and the kendo guys come in after that. It's really funny in the cool light of day, but not when you work, say, with twenty tones of peat like I do, or with 500 rolls of grass, or with a ton of water. It's very hard to drain a ton of water in five minutes at the end of a rehearsal so the t'ai chi guys can come in. You lose a lot of hair, and you age very prematurely. I'm only 25!!

So I went to Vienna and I rehearsed in Vienna. Now, in Vienna they have everything, it's like the Firkin Crane or the ICD on steroids. They have everything, it's ridiculous. And my very close friend, and artistic ally, Mick Dolan – which is why I'm Michael Keegan Dolan, because there was another Michael Dolan, who's an artist, a dancer-actor – lives in Vienna. He has become very soft around the edges, as soft as he could become around the edges, because he's from Balinteer. So, say you exist in Germany or Vienna, where you're very much more supported than in Ireland, there is a downside. The downside is that you become quasi-institutionalised. You expect the studio to be warm. You expect the floor to be clean. You expect the CD player to work. You expect the coffee to be really good in the canteen. Now this is kind of good, but it has a tiny downside – here's a very interesting point: someone said to me, maybe you could use Robert Lepage's structure in Montreal when you make your next piece. Of course this is not going to happen, but someone said it to me and I was thinking, great. Then someone else said to me, be careful Michael, you'll lose you edge. Now this is a really interesting point. As artists we are conditioned to believe that if we work in shitty conditions our art will be better. As artists we are conditioned to believe that if we don't get enough money – actually artists use this as an excuse. 'I didn't quite have enough

money, the actors I got weren't quite good enough, therefore I have a get-out clause. The piece was crap, but I didn't have enough money.' So if I say to an artist, say you have enough money, enough time, enough space, then the work has got to be good. But a lot of people don't want enough money either, there's a downside for artists. They don't want the space, they don't really want a shit-hot venue, because it doesn't give them all those safety valves to escape. Irish artists can use that as an excuse for the work falling short of the mark. Viennese artists are the other end. They have everything. They have too much. It gets too easy. I was in Vienna, and I thought maybe I could make my new piece there, but after three weeks I didn't want to make any work in Vienna. Not because Vienna is not a beautiful city; it is a beautiful city. But because the shit is very inspiring as well. Art happens sometimes in places of great struggle, where the struggle is energy. Great things can happen in Ireland because of that, but we have to be careful that we don't fall in love with it. That we somehow feel it's our role in life, to not have what we need to make art. So you have to be very careful as an artist.

I'm wrapping up now. So, as I said, that's my structure. I'm very much like Jane. I have a laptop and a mobile phone, and a mobile home at the moment. I would love to have a base. Part of me is frightened of having the base because I feel like if suddenly I have a studio, my work will get really bad. So they say that's the kiss of death. You have your studio, you have your administrator and your work gets really dull. I don't think that's true. I think you can have both and your work can be really good and your work can be very much supported.

From the Arts Council I get revenue funding. They have done away, as you all know, with the three-year plan. I never got three year funding, I get one year funding. I can't necessarily plan for next year because I won't know until December whether I get my money. Next year what I've got planned is that *Giselle* gets revived at the Barbican Centre in London for two weeks. There's talk of a new production for the Dublin Theatre Festival, and there's talk of bringing *Giselle* to Minneapolis to the Guthrie Centre. There's lots of talk of lots of stuff but it's all virtual, apart from the Barbican which is confirmed. However – I really want to get this point in – because my company is not a full-time company, when my work gets bought by a festival they will pay for everything, but they cannot pay for say, a four week revival period. So the Arts Council

or someone has to pay for that. The Arts Council have a policy where they do not pay for revivals. If my company was full-time I would not need a long rehearsal period because my company would be together. We'd have shorthand. But my company all disappear. They all have to come back together again. For my work to be good it needs an energetic depth, you cannot just all come together and throw it on. Some artists can, but I can't work like that. I need to be with my guys for a long period of time. Someone has to pay the guys to be there. That's where the Arts Council has to come in. So I have a problem: I can't plan necessarily. You just have to assume that you're going to get your Arts Council funding, and you have to go into your meeting and just try and read the body language. These guys, they're all very nice people, but they can't guarantee it.

The landscape is so transitory. One minute you're dealing with Patricia Quinn, the next minute you're dealing with Mary Cloake. One minute you're dealing with Fergus Linehan, the next minute you're dealing with Don Shipley. If you're talking about building relationships, what's the point? No one is there long enough. Which I why I don't bother, necessarily, to form any deep and meaningful relationships. It's also incredibly mercenary. Someone gets to know you really well and then they cut your funding. It's very hard to get too close to people because they might have to shaft you in six months time.

Just to finish up. I don't know how things could be better. It would be really great if there was great rehearsal spaces in Dublin, but when I think about there being great rehearsal spaces – and I know they're building studios – I can also see the future of people fighting to get the time, and companies wanting to be residents, and people hating you because you go the space and they didn't. And that's crap.

The thing I'd like to close up on is that if people are making really, really good work that will do a whole lot more for our existence as artists than anything else, if the work is really good. I know, how do you qualify good work? Is *Riverdance* good because it sells out for ten years? Or is Jerome Bel's work good because it pisses everybody off? I don't know. I don't have the answer to that. Someone might know the answer to that. I think if people are making really exciting, good work then the rest will almost take care of itself because there's not enough good work around. If you're making really good stuff, it will happen.

Caitríona Crowe: I don't know why he was nervous. That was a tour de force. We got a free performance along with all the information.

Dónal O'Kelly is our last contributor this morning. A very well known playwright and actor. As I said in my introduction, he's been performing one-man shows throughout the English speaking world for many, many years now. *Catalpa* in particular has won awards. Anybody who has seen it can testify to what an extraordinary performance it is, and what an extraordinary concept it is. He's been associated with Calypso productions for which he's done a lot of work related to the other great interest in his life, human rights. Some of the plays that they've produced have been very much connected into that agenda. I saw *Farawayan* in the old Olympic Ballroom off Camden St. in I think 1998, and it was something nobody else was doing at the time in terms of the production values and the ideas underlining it. Absolutely wonderful work. He also of course plays conventional parts in traditional companies. He's recently played the part of Seán O Casey in Colm Tobín's play *Beauty in a Broken Place* in the Peacock Theatre. He's currently touring Ireland; he's very kindly come up from Waterford today where he's performing his newest one-man show *Jimmy Joyced*. So Dónal is going to share with us some of his perceptions of what it's like to work in the way that he does.

Dónal O'Kelly: I feel very lucky that I'm coming last because I was very nervous before but now I'm buzzed up after listening to Jane and Michael.

I love live theatre. I've especially emphasised that to myself in the last fifteen, twenty minutes. I love live theatre, and that's what I love doing. What I've spent an awful lot of my time over the last fifteen years is finding a way of being involved in live theatre sustainably. That's what I'm really interested in, is trying to find a way that we can do it where it's not just a flash in the pan. It's not just a stroke of luck. It's not about getting a hit show that transfers somewhere. That there's a way of doing it sustainably.

I spent a lot of time working with Calypso, and we saw Arts Councils come and go during that time; I served on the board and was involved a lot. I went through the whole thing of finding out the buzzwords for each Arts Council, what they were interested in. Interpreting it, and feeding it back. In retrospect we must have been pretty

good at it, because Calypso is a very established, stable company now. But there is another way of looking at things, and it's getting back to the basics. What is live theatre? What I love about live theatre is the feeling of a dynamic. It's when it's really working, it's like participatory. The audience and performer or performers are involved in something that creates an energy in the room or in the hall or wherever it is you're performing it. And I love when that happens. That's what keeps me going, trying to find new ways of doing it.

One of the things I suppose I want to focus on today is touring, especially in Ireland. One of the things that changed in the last few years in Ireland is that a whole load of venues have sprung up. Small-scale venues, but equipped to different levels. It's like a whole new vista that's opened up. They're looking for live theatre to come to it; live theatre a lot of the time is looking for venues to perform. There has to be an easy way to make this happen, to bring these two things together in a way that's sustainable.

You know the catchphrase – I've heard it a lot lately with the US election going on – the old political catchphrase 'It's the economy, stupid'. Well actually I think that's stupid, because the real visionary catchphrase is 'It's the ecology, stupid'. It's like economics. There's such a narrow minded form of constraining human behaviour and human activity that I think in a couple of centuries time it'll be looked back on as ridiculously backward, because ecology is much more far-reaching and visionary. Ecologists have to look long-term and they have to look at things sustainably. Economics ends up with pollution and all this stuff. I don't want to get into it. You can read it in books. But, ecology is about creating, nurturing an environment. That's why I prefer thinking about art and live theatre in terms of habitat and environment than in terms of industry. Once the industry comes into it, it all seems to get bogged down in how do you get into funding channels, and how do you run with your little bucket under this funding stream. You have to do that sometimes, and I have got involved in that in varying degrees of success and failure. But there is another way of looking at it and I think it's more futuristic, it's more progressive.

I can write and I can act, so I suppose it's not a big surprise that I end up performing my own stuff a lot of the time. I write plays for other people too, so sometimes there's more than me involved. There is a way of doing it, I think, that looks

at the habitat of small scale venues in Ireland, and you gear your flower to suit the habitat. For me it means text-based, rather than most theatre shows, and I know Michael is way up the other end of the spectrum, but that doesn't invalidate this end of the rainbow as well. There is a way of doing text-based, where it's ninety percent text and ten percent visual impact stuff, and you can do it almost anywhere. You can do it in a little hall with nothing; just bring along a couple of lamps, put them on, and very little equipment needed. I'm very interested in using words and performance, and just what you come along equipped with, just yourself, and make the live theatre thing happen. It doesn't always happen I can tell you. But when it does it's a great experience and a great buzz, that's what I'm really interested in.

I think there is a way of accommodating it. I read a fair bit about environmental studies and ecology in the last year or so. One thing I read about is how you have to have diversity of stuff growing in soil in order for the soil to be enriched. They've tried industrial agriculture, which is the environmental equivalent of juggernaut theatre tours in my way of thinking. They tried that out in the Soviet Union, the Midwest of America and various places, and they discovered, painfully, that it doesn't work. Thinking big scale doesn't work with food production and in the same way I like thinking ecologically about nurturing live theatre. You've got to have the right diversity. You've got to nurture the habitat that suits what you're doing as well as bring along an organism that is suited to the soil. You try and bring the two together.

It's very hard to do that without some kind of support base though. An organic fertiliser is what's needed, so Arts Council please this is where you prick up your ears. This needs to be nurtured in a way that's easy. I'm also more interested in pedal power than piston engine machines. I think there's a way of doing this; the word I use is 'lightfoot'. Lightfoot theatre touring. You don't want to drive a juggernaut truck into a forest glade. You just walk in and you present your theatre in a way that suits that environment.

The other night I was in Manorhamilton, the Glens Centre. A wonderful place. For me, a big crowd of people; ninety or a hundred people, I was delighted. It felt like a real live theatre occasion. But in order to do one night stands like that you can't have whole day-long get ins. You have to gear what you produce so that you arrive along in a

car and the get in takes two hours. That means the set, the lights, the sound, everything set up in two hours. Then you have to go for a meal, you come back, you do the show, everything goes back in in a half an hour and you're gone. I call it lightfoot theatre touring. The reason I link that with sustainability is there's a way of doing that that doesn't mean techies are worn out working 24 hours trying to get the set up. You have to do it lightfoot. It means not having solid sets. It means relying an awful lot on what you can do yourself as much as possible. But because we're artists you pick very specifically the artistic backup you need. You try to use as specific images as you can, and as lightfoot help as you can to flick the images into the audience's imagination. That's the other keyword. The most crucial thing in any theatre is the audience's imagination. It's finding ways of opening that up to give all the visual images you want in their heads. I think it works far better in their minds than trying to produce it representationally. And it's much easier, in that you can just drive to the gig in a car. You don't even need a van. I'm doing this *Jimmy Joyced* tour in a Renault Clio.

I'll tell you what happened. The anecdote is sometimes the best image maker. This *Jimmy Joyced* tour I'm doing – I thought I was getting fantastically organised because I had posters and I had flyers in advance. I know it was a bit late for you Polly at the Pavilion, apologies. The flyers were out, for nearly every venue, the required amount of time in advance. I thought Jaysus Christ I'm getting to be a wizard, I can even do this much. Then I met a guy who came to the show in the Peacock. He was a friend of Karl Shiels. He's Declan McCarthy, lives in Baltimore. Karl Shiels told him about my show, *Jimmy Joyced*, we spoke for about fifteen minutes, and he said Jesus I'd love to bring that show down to Baltimore. I said, well, the flyer is done and all the rest. But it ended up that we fitted in another gig. I was doing Macroom, so the night before I said we'd do Baltimore. It was all got together in about two weeks. We were on in the sailing club, and the guy had about a hundred people jammed into this tiny little shed down on the harbour in Baltimore, and it was a fantastic night. It went on until two o'clock in the morning. It felt like, to me, what live theatre engagement is about. It was great, people were sitting on the floor, and all. Then we had the meeting in the car afterwards. He said come on out and we'll do the reconciliation, they call it. So we're both sitting in the car with the little ceiling light on and he starts – ok I had to pay the sailing club £150 for the

rental thing, I had to spend £70 printing the tickets. What the fuck did you have to get the tickets printed for? And the PA cost this, this and this. So he divided it out, and he said there you are. He did so badly out of it I gave him the programme money.

The point I'm making is he made a fantastic gig happen, whatever network he used he got a great, exciting event set up for me. I just had to come in and do the show. I think people like him should qualify for a license. If people set up a certain number of gigs like that, that they qualify for a sort of fast-track licence so that there's a way of just getting a real quick email into the Arts Council to say "I want to do a gig down in this place" and that there's a guarantee against losses. So that those kind of niggly costs are covered, and it ends up that somebody like him who sets up a fantastic gig gets his producer's cut if you like. That nobody has to take a big risk. That's what I would love the Arts Council to do. The main thing would be removing risk, because sometimes the risk is very daunting. Even in this lightfoot touring. It doesn't take that much. I think the main objective is to spread low risk between the venue, the artistic company, and the Arts Council. Because we're talking sustainable and ecological, the costs are very low involved. There's a way of doing it that can work long-term.

Caitríona Crowe: Now I'm sure you found all of that as illuminating as I did, and I think special thanks are due to our three contributors, because they are doing something that they don't normally do. I know from all three that they were quite nervous about today because this is not the sort of thing that they normally do. I think we have learned such a great deal from all three and I particularly was struck by their commitment to what they do. This is the bedrock of the performing arts; people being committed and enthused and enabled by that commitment and enthusiasm to produce the very different sorts of work that they produce. Without these people there wouldn't be any theatre, it wouldn't be happening. All the rest of it is the superstructure, but these are the people who actually produce the goods and get it out there for our delectation.

I'm going to throw the discussion open to the audience. Questions can be asked, not that we will necessarily be able to answer all your questions. Also contributions. If anybody wants to say anything that's on their mind about what they've heard or about the issue in general or to make any suggestions about how matters might be improved.

Audience 1: Hello my name is Ciarán Taylor from BDNC Theatre, and I love live theatre. I want to address the idea that was brought of buildings and structure and infrastructure, and then the artists who need them to work, and how the two can come together a bit more. I'm inspired by the backdrop there. I assume it's the Four Courts (backdrop for Mannix Flynn's performance – James X)? I've never had any call to go there. When the Free State or the anti Free State people were holed up there and being bombed by their comrades outside – you get the feeling sometimes when you are on the fringes it's a bit like that. Give us back our building, we deserve to be in there, you get out. And then they burned all the records of course. That's my point really. How can we get in there?

I run an independent company that's non-funded, but we drag some money together here and there. We've recently done a co-production with the Pavilion Theatre in Dún Laoghaire, and I think that's a great model because the buildings are there, the resources are there. If the artist can somehow not have to create a whole administrative structure and have an office, and hardware, and permanent salaries to be paying out, then more money can go to actually allowing the time and the basic resources that you need which are space and time, to create new work, of whatever sort; be it light footed or heavy handed or whatever.

Ideally as well in that context if there was some sort of sense of companies belonging to spaces for a certain amount of time, that artists get continuity in terms of being able to work all year round instead of with gaps of six months between each production. So standards and styles can evolve, and that's very much what I'm interested in; trying to revitalise a sense of style, sort of along the lines that Michael was talking about. I'll just throw that out as an idea of a model. Administrative structures are there belonging to the buildings, the buildings are there. If they were a little bit more open to allowing the artist to come to them and being associated with them, and instead of doubling up on resources, to use what's there. Then more of the money can be filtered into what's actually what's being produced, and to give the audience some sort of consistent range of work.

Caitríona Crowe: Thanks for that. I think one of the keywords that's coming out of all of this is flexibility. That what's needed is flexibility in terms of resources, sharing and allocating and so on.

Audience 2: Hello my name is Dylan Tighe from the Irish Cultural Centre in Sarajevo. I wanted to come back to something that Michael was talking about there about the art being more important than the money. I have to sort of laugh because I say the Irish Cultural Centre in Sarajevo, which is basically me and a Hotmail address and a pair of fancy boots. Basically I've been out there on and off for about three years, and extremely inspired by what's happening there. All of this talking about money, when you spend time out there, seems almost superfluous because there's people making incredible work out there who can't even afford that piece of bread. For them to even be in a conference or to even get a visa to be here would be an extraordinary thing, to even talk about money. They don't even ask for money because there is none.

What I wanted to harp back to, it is, as Michael says, that art is paramount. That there is good art, amazing art happening for no money, and eventually it will be recognised, and it's only from the dedication and talent and inspiration coming from the artists that will make it happen. All of the structures are extra. They are almost extra-curricular to the real work that's happening.

The inspiration for this is because I'm also an actor and director; I've worked with Jane a lot, I've worked with many people in this room. But my artistic life is not any longer viable in this country, the irony that the sort of work that Michael's talking about making, and other artists that have a grand vision of what they want to create, can be made easier in a Third World country than in a First World European democracy, in inverted commas, that has massive expenditure at its fingertips that is just simply not being given fairly. And that is the point. So, we're trying to set up a centre there as a sort of parallel universe almost, for Irish artists that can go out there, use the facilities, have as big a rehearsal space as you want, have access to fabulous dancers, fabulous artists, go skiing in the mountains, and drink Bosnian coffee all day if you like, in a very inspiring environment, with people who are only too willing to do whatever you want because they are interested in getting your energy, in connecting with your energy. They

don't give a bollocks about administrative structures because there is none. That's the deal, and I hope that eventually we can all go there.

It's not a holiday adventure. Here I am doing this and I'm in €10,000 debt and I have to go back to Sarajevo on Tuesday. God knows how I'm going to do it, but it doesn't matter, because I'm into creating art. I don't have any money but, as they say in Bosnia 'No money, no problem'. You can't have a problem with money if you don't have any. The art is important.

The idea is to bring people out there and create work, and give Irish artists, paradoxically, the space to create the work they should be creating in Ireland in a Third World country on the fringes of Europe, forgotten by bloody everybody at this stage. The circus has moved on to some other death camp in Iraq.

Anyway I'd just like to thank the panel for coming and putting their guts out on the table. Even here's me shaking, and I can usually beat Fidel Castro over the length of his speeches. It's great to see people coming here and donning a different hat, and talking about their work. It's great to see so many theatre artists here prepared to engage with the administrative labyrinth that does zap your energy. It does lead to nervous breakdowns, it does lead to complete saturation of energy that should be, and needs to be, directed somewhere else.

Audience 3: I'm Martin Murphy of TEAM Educational Theatre Company. I have to admit I thought this was on in the Coach House, which shows you how long ago it was the last time I came to Theatre Shop, so I missed Jane and Michael. Please forgive me if I'm covering ground that they've already covered.

I was struck - myself and Dónal talked about it before, his model of the ecological theatre – that the problem that we have with that sort of a model of theatre that can only be for a hundred people at a time is that how on earth does it pay for itself. How on earth does that risk get spread around? Inevitably part of the risk is going to be off-loaded by doing things in smaller scale, as in smaller cast, shows. Obviously leading to the plethora of shows that we see which are one-person shows. I think it's a very important part of theatre, but I want to see more shows in small venues with bigger casts.

I don't want to knock the Arts Council, and I think that the movement towards evaluation and evaluative structures and everything is extraordinarily important. It is important that we have to ask those questions of ourselves, about what actually were we setting out to do when we decided to do this production. But we're all very good at ticking boxes and making sure that whatever happens that this looks like it is artistic expenditure, and it's not expenditure on administration. 'We hardly spend anything on administration, all that stuff we were doing in the office, that was all for the artistic product.'

It seems to me that we ourselves let ourselves down in that we are prepared in situations where we're putting on shows, where you do want to eliminate that risk, the tendency is to throw money at it. The tendency is to spend more on the set and less on the actors. The tendency is to make sure that in the back of your mind you feel that if they go away at least they feel like they got perfect choreography or a fantastic set or something like that. Obviously it's not so in the case of the small theatres, but certainly when you go into the big theatres you find money dripping off the stage, but the actual content you have question marks about. If I had a wish from the Arts Council it's that there was some sort of an evaluation, or that some sort of pressure was put on companies - maybe it is put on companies, there's a lot put on our company, and certainly in theatre in education you do not get an opportunity to throw money at a production - but that questions would be asked about how much money is actually being spent on what is a picture frame, and how much is being spent on the artists themselves. Maybe that criteria is in there, but I'd love to see that there was a level of funding, or a specific category of funding which would fit in with Dónal's model of the ecological theatre, whereby companies are told no, you can't actually spend more than a certain amount on the production values of your product. Maybe that means you can't have a cast of 55 or whatever. That there are certain boundaries that you are working within this limit, if you are going out to these small venues, or even if you're doing the M50 tours (i.e. necklace of theatre venues on the perimeter of Dublin city). That we are funding you because we want you to do more of a particular type of theatre, and the particular type of theatre I want to see more of is more theatre with more than one person on the stage.

Audience 4: (Manix Flynn) I'm just interested in listening to the complaints about theatre over the last couple of years, and I'm kind of amazed at the very polite atmosphere in the room, considering what's going on in theatre, and in the Arts Council etc. I'm very interested in all kinds of theatre. I see myself as an artist essentially, and therefore I see everything as creative I can utilise. I don't see any reason why artists can't do visual art or theatre with a bit of chalk or whatever. What I find quite interesting is that in this room at this moment there are a lot of people who are quite well subsidised, and have been subsidised for quite a long time.

The idea of the model theatre is very feasible, and I don't believe that we need to go to the Arts Council because they'll only laugh at us. Because they'll go to the government who'll laugh at them. The thing about it is that it's completely under-resourced for a simple reason. No one's interested. The large majority of people out there are disenfranchised from theatre. It's as simple as that. This whole idea of outreach and reaching people is a joke. The idea that Dónal was talking about of an individual filling out a room is where it's at. But at the end of the day, what you're doing in that situation is you're working for nothing. What I'd be very interested in is that the companies that are here and the companies that are out there, small, medium or large, and the big companies who have what's known as outreach money or community arts money. The national cultural institutes. That they pool that resource for the model theatre that we're looking for, that a small percentage of the grants is pooled into what is called a shared resource, and that we go for this idea as a group of individuals. If we present it as a paper to the Arts Council they will go, thank you very much, and they will get a load of money to research it. That's the simple situation. That's what will happen, and the government will have more departments on the situation.

What's interesting to note is during the recent plight of the Abbey Theatre - which is a national cultural institute - as far as I'm aware, not many of the other national cultural institutes came out to support or defend it in its present situation. If we are anything, we are all committed. I don't see any multi-millionaires here, I don't see any Jags parked outside. I know that there's a lot of commitment here. I think there's an awful lot of energy spent into the Arts Council, into making applications. Your heart goes out, and I've been there. What I tend to do now is I tend to *do* the work. I tend to

do it across a broad spectrum, and I tend to commit myself. This up here, again, is the Four Courts, and it's a show that's here. I have trouble getting an audience. That's the simple situation. I have trouble getting people to come and see the work. This is all for you. But I think at the end of the day, rather than looking to the Arts Councils, we have to show the way. It's actually down to us now. It's not down to the policy makers, because they've actually failed us. We have an Arts Council that has dropped its plan. We have a new Arts Council that doesn't have a plan. We have a national theatre that's looking for a new building. We have the administration down there in a heap. And we're in here asking about what can we do, can we get resources, can we get bigger places, can we get warehouses to work in. We haven't got any of these things. So what we're talking about here, we don't actually have, as far as I can hear from the group up there. But I believe that we do have within our situation great power to do that. We're just looking in the wrong place. We've got to look to ourselves. We've got to sit down, and I believe we've got to take that idea of putting a few bob of our grant into that situation moves it on really quick. We've got to move so as the Arts Council have a place to move to. We're the artists, and we have to make that move so the government sees that move, otherwise they're going to say, that gang are subsidised, they're all ok. I believe that creativity and artistic endeavour and theatre is extremely healthy. The reason why I say that is because I'm here.

Audience 5: My name is Catherine Boothman, I work as the European Cultural Contact Point in the Arts Council. I just wanted to respond to one of the early points about how do you link the companies of artists with the venues. This isn't the big answer to the sustainability question but two examples would be maybe negotiating a medium term association between artists and a venue. An example of that would be Theatre Zoud Plane in the south of Rotterdam, for instance, where it's a municipal theatre. In order to liaise with groups of artists who are coming up in that area, they set up loose association agreements where they would support the artists to make a number of pieces of work over a period of a few years. It was very good because they were working with, say, Dutch artists from a Moroccan background, who are trying to establish a company so the

sturdy theatre gave them a place, and also acted as a liaison to professional theatre makers in Morocco to have a sustainable cultural link there.

A second example would be within the context of a transnational project agreement, or a co-production, where a large theatre structure, for instance, could build an association in the format of a project maybe with a smaller, lighter artist collective or independent company of artists. An example would be Theatre Meiningen in Germany, which is like a big massive heavy theatre with a full orchestra, full company, a very big building, and a light structure like an independent artist group like Milady Levi in Ljubljana. So there are just two suggestions.

Audience 6: David Teevan. I'm a freelance producer. I thoroughly enjoyed this morning's contributions from the three speakers. It's been a while since I was at the Theatre Shop and it was very inspiring. There was a reference there to being too old, too tired, and too talented. I've been working in the business for seventeen years. I don't feel old or tired at the moment, and I often question what my talent is in relation to the arts and what I can contribute. I think that Michael spoke of passion in his speech, when he was talking to Arts Council members and he became too passionate. Emotional. I know I've been in that position myself. But I suppose as time goes on I find that the emotion is becoming less, but I'm glad to say that the passion is still there. I think passion and emotion are very closely linked, and I think without the passion we are at nothing. In Dónal's contribution he talked about the ecology, and was something that really resonated with me. I was drawn to live in Tipperary because of the organic farmers community, and I found that I wasn't part of that because farming wasn't my thing. The arts were my thing, and the arts in Clonmel have grown out of the organic farming movement in that we are part of a bigger community. Now we have the organic farmers feeding us, and in turn we can feed them back with our arts and our culture.

I think the idea of a sustainable environment is something we should all hold onto. I enjoy flirting with the Arts Council from time to time but I'm married to my art. I think that's what will sustain us if we can hold onto that. Life has become very expensive, and it was interesting to hear the man from Sarajevo, and look at that. There is a just truth in producing wonderful large-scale work in as much as there is with

Dónal's, and we have to be aware of that. We have to give the people the possibility to see the magnificent, wonderful, expensive culture.

Dónal O'Kelly: I don't want everyone copying me. That wasn't my intention at all. I wouldn't invalidate any other type of theatre in the slightest.

Caitríona Crowe Unfortunately I'm afraid that's all we have time for today. Many thanks to everyone for their contributions.