

**Speech of An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D.,
at the Abbey Theatre Dinner**

2 November 2018

Good evening.

Thank you for the invitation to join you this evening.

As the great George Bernard Shaw once said: ‘You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul.’

The Abbey Theatre has been helping us to see our soul for more than 100 years.

Whenever anyone doubts the importance of arts and culture to this country you only have to look to our history.

Almost one hundred years ago, the Irish state was created out of the fires of the national demand for self-determination. During that revolutionary decade, the Abbey Theatre was the torchbearer of the struggle for freedom.

We know the stories of your seven members – male and female – who took part in the Easter Rising. We also know that the works performed in the Abbey inspired hundreds more.

You helped ignite the cultural revival and, in doing so, you helped create our Irish state.

It has been said, with much justification, that 'No other theatre has been so directly involved in the rise of a nation'.

The venue may have changed over the years, but your place in the heart of Irish cultural life – and in our hearts – has not.

And it's why the Government is proud to make a major investment in your future.

In Project Ireland 2040 we allocated €80m towards the Abbey Theatre Redevelopment project.

We believe in your ambitions to develop a new National Theatre, one that will match the national theatres of other European Capital Cities.

The new building will honour the history and legacy of the Abbey Theatre, and will strengthen Ireland's reputation as a centre for theatre.

This €80m commitment by the Government is a challenge grant, seed funding that will be bolstered and leveraged through further commitments from individuals, companies, foundations and partners who are similarly ambitious for Ireland's National Theatre.

As Taoiseach I would like to acknowledge their help and thank them for contributing to this national project.

Companies such as Irish Life, daa, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, The Doyle Collections, Diageo, Friends First, PWC, KPMG, Aviva, Avolon and so on; as well as your partnerships with the Ireland Funds, the Vitners Federation, the Abbey Theatre Foundation, the Ireland US Council and the Members of the Abbey, help you realise your ambitions.

We all share in the belief that a new Abbey Theatre will regenerate the surrounding areas and play a leading role in Dublin's growing economy, both the night-time and the day-time economy; and bolster Ireland's growing international reputation for culture.

Last year more than half of the people who came to see a performance at the Abbey Theatre were doing so for the very first time. Your work epitomises the spirit of Creative Ireland, because it is about:

- enabling the creative potential of every child;
- enabling creativity in every community;
- investing in our creative and cultural infrastructure;
- making Ireland as a centre of creative excellence; and
- expanding our global reputation as a creative and cultural nation.

The Government's investment in your work reflects the value we place on arts and culture.

When I became leader of my party and Taoiseach, I made a commitment to double spending on arts, culture and sport within seven years.

This requires an increase of approximately 10.5% per annum.

We have kept our word.

This year the increases in the budgets for arts, culture, heritage, the Gaeltacht and sport have all exceeded this figure. We are on track to meet the commitment and, in fact, we are slightly ahead.

In Budget 2019 we are providing €36 million in additional funding for culture, language and heritage, an increase of 12% on last year.

This includes €21 million in capital expenditure and €15 million in current expenditure and brings the total culture, language and heritage budget next year to almost €340 million.

We all know why investing in culture and the arts matters:

- Culture drives tourism and creates jobs;
- Culture enriches our lives and the human experience; and most important of all,
- Our unique culture is the window through which most of the world sees Ireland for the first time.

We want to ensure that cultural infrastructure reaches all parts of our country, all of our cities and towns and localities, all of our communities.

To conclude, the Abbey Theatre has been tested many times over the past 12 decades. Each time, you have found new ways and better ways of doing things.

In every generation you have posed searching questions, and have inspired us to find our own answers.

Great art tends to do that.

In every generation the Abbey Theatre has been reborn. Sometimes this was literally the case, such as when fire ravaged the buildings in 1951 and a new theatre had to be rebuilt out of the ashes. That took fifteen years. This new development will take two to three years, but is no less significant.

Throughout your history, the Abbey has been a living theatre, providing entertainment, provoking controversy, and presenting all kinds of Irish life to national and international audiences.

Long may you continue!

I will leave you with a final thought. Politics is about imagining the possible and then trying to make it a reality.

Theatre – like all great art – is about imagining the impossible and bringing it to life.

It's why it inspires us and it's why it's so important in our lives.

For all us, including us politicians.

We should all be encouraged to imagine the impossible and then try to make it happen.

Art inspires us to do better.

So thank you.