



ABBAY THEATRE
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**A report by the Abbey Theatre to the
Minister for Culture, Heritage and the
Gaeltacht, in response to the issues
raised in the open letter of 7 January
2019**

Abbey Theatre

Introduction

This report focuses on the outcomes of a series of bilateral meetings between the Abbey Theatre and representatives of a cross section of disciplines in the Irish theatre community. These meetings were set up to provide the Directors of the Abbey Theatre and the representatives with an opportunity to engage in a comprehensive and structured dialogue.

During the bilateral meetings, representatives of the theatre community provided feedback to the Abbey Theatre on their issues of concern, and the Directors of the Abbey Theatre and their team shared information with their colleagues in the sector. The meetings led to a number of agreed actions, which respond directly to the letter to the Minister of 7 January. They are detailed throughout this report.

Over the course of the bilateral meetings, it became clear that certain aspects of communication between the Abbey Theatre and the theatre community need to be improved and the Theatre is committed to addressing this requirement.

This report has been prepared for the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan TD.

Background

On Monday, 7 January 2019, an open letter was written to the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan TD, signed by 312 freelance theatre practitioners, expressing concerns about the Abbey Theatre's current production model. This letter also appeared in full in The Irish Times.

The Abbey Theatre has great respect for the artists who signed the letter and has taken its content and the concerns raised by this important group of practitioners very seriously. Consequently, the Abbey Theatre extended an invitation on 8 January to representatives of the signatories to meet at the earliest opportunity to discuss the points they raised.

In advance of the meeting with the representatives of the signatories, Dr. Frances Ruane (Chair of the Abbey Theatre) and Neil Murray (Director of the Abbey Theatre) accepted an invitation to appear before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht on 30 January, alongside representatives of signatories and the Arts Council, to discuss the concerns raised in the letter in more detail.

The following two issues raised in the letter had already been discussed by the Abbey Theatre with the Arts Council in late 2018 and were near resolution.

- 1) *We respectfully ask that The National Theatre engages in a greater percentage of in-house productions, as opposed to co-productions or buy-ins.*

The Abbey Theatre had already made specific commitments to the Arts Council in relation to the balance of the artistic programme. The Theatre's commitment to being primarily a producing theatre was reflected in the 2019 programme, most of which was announced on 28 November 2018. Self and co-produced works will continue at the Theatre, along with limited 'presentations', which have always featured as part of the Abbey Theatre's programming. However, the Abbey Theatre will no longer engage in 'in association' partnerships, outside of some longstanding agreements already in place.¹

- 2) *We demand that Performers, Directors and Designers whose work is used by the National Theatre are given National Theatre terms and conditions, along with every other employee in the building.*

At a meeting of the Abbey Theatre and the Arts Council in December 2018, the Abbey Theatre committed to ensuring that all independent artists employed on co-productions as part of the artistic programme would receive the corresponding rates of pay and conditions received by those employed in self-produced shows. Furthermore, these contractual terms will apply to both self-productions and co-productions when on tour. These arrangements have been in place since the beginning of 2019 and represent a new industry standard. Going forward, the Theatre will have clear, stated policies on employment conditions for all freelance artists, both those employed on Abbey Theatre productions and, crucially, on co-productions.

Dialogue Process

On 1 February 2019, the Abbey Theatre met with representatives of theatre practitioners for an initial scoping meeting. It was agreed that a process of bilateral meetings with representatives from the various sectors within the theatre community would follow to deal with the issues raised.

Following the scoping meeting, the Abbey Theatre organised the following set of bilateral meetings with representatives from different disciplines and official industry bodies:

- Actors / Agents / Irish Equity – Tuesday 12 March
- Theatre Designers / ISSSD (Irish Society of Stage and Screen Designers) – Friday 15 March
- Directors – Tuesday 19 March
- Writers / The Writers Guild of Ireland – Friday 22 March

¹ Glossary: Self-produced shows are those fully undertaken by the Abbey Theatre. In co-produced shows, the Abbey Theatre partners with companies in jointly creating a show. With 'in-association' productions, the Abbey Theatre invites a company, on a shared financial model, to create and perform on one of the Abbey Theatre stages, and 'presented' shows are where the Abbey pays a fee or box-office guarantee to a visiting company, often a company on tour.

- Producers / Technicians / AIST (Association of Irish Stage Technicians) – Wednesday 27 March

Both Abbey Theatre Directors, Graham McLaren and Neil Murray, attended all meetings, alongside the relevant members of the Abbey Theatre team, including the Heads of Producing, Dramaturg, HR Director, Associate Director and Technical Director. Each meeting was co-chaired by the HR Director of the Abbey Theatre and a representative of the signatories.

The dialogue discussions were frank, offering an important opportunity for the Directors and staff to listen and reflect, and to provide clarification to the representatives of the signatories with information beyond what had previously been in the public domain.

The meetings concluded at the end of March. The series of action points, which address the outstanding issues raised by the different disciplines, form the basis of the next section of this report.

Outcome of Sectoral Dialogue Meetings and Agreed Actions

1. Meeting with Actors / Agents / Casting / Irish Equity

This meeting focussed on concerns around opportunities for actors at the Abbey Theatre, particularly in relation to the casting process and the circumstances that had led to a different casting structure at the Theatre. The shape of the Abbey Theatre's programme was also discussed, and further clarification was provided of the Theatre's pay policy for artists and companies working at the Theatre under independent contracts. The Abbey Theatre committed to the following actions:

- 1.1.** From 15 March 2019, there will be an interim, named point of contact for casting enquiries at the Theatre. A casting@abbeytheatre.ie address will be set up, displayed on the 'Work With Us' section of the website and monitored by the dedicated member of staff.
- 1.2.** On 8 May 2019, the Abbey Theatre will meet with Irish Equity to continue discussions in relation to pay rates of the relevant professionals.
- 1.3.** By 17 May 2019, at the latest, the Abbey Theatre will provide a timetabled plan of action to reinstate a permanent casting presence at the Theatre.

Irish Equity and the representatives of the signatories committed to the following action:

- 1.4.** To meet with representatives of the independent theatre sector and revert to the Abbey Theatre with a set of proposals for consideration in relation to payments for performers working at the Theatre under 'Presentation Agreements'.

2. Meeting with Theatre Designers / ISSSD

The meeting with designers looked at the potential opportunities for Irish-based designers at the Abbey Theatre, as well as at fee rates. It also explored the creation of opportunities for both emerging and established designers to benefit from the experience of meeting with visiting international designers. The Abbey Theatre committed to the following actions:

- 2.1.** With immediate effect, the Abbey Theatre will reinstate a vouched expenses budget of €500 for costume designers.
- 2.2.** By 26 April 2019, the Abbey Theatre will share with the ISSSD and the representatives of the signatories the minimum fee rates for all categories of designers across the Abbey and Peacock stages.
- 2.3.** By 28 May 2019, the Abbey Theatre will respond to the representatives of the signatories on a request for a dedicated design room in the current building.
- 2.4.** By 26 June 2019, the Abbey Theatre will provide an update on the structure of the Costume Department.
- 2.5.** By 26 June 2019, in consultation with the ISSSD, the Abbey Theatre will consider the rates for designers' fees as part of an overall review of all pay rates at the Theatre. Any amendments will be implemented in 2020.

3. Meeting with Directors

The meeting with directors focused largely on the issue of opportunities for freelance directors at the Abbey Theatre. The discussion noted that, in the decade prior to 2017, there were no rehearsal-room theatre makers employed as part of the full-time executive at the Theatre. It was acknowledged that this gave rise to a need to employ freelance directors for each play in the artistic programme. However, the re-calibration of the programme to feature more self-produced work from 2019 will increase those opportunities under the current artistic leadership. The Abbey Theatre committed to the following actions:

- 3.1.** By 28 May 2019, the Abbey Theatre will announce the date of a half-day meeting with invited directors to establish how best the Theatre can help develop the careers of emerging freelance directors.
- 3.2.** In line with other disciplines, the fee rates for directors will be reviewed as part of an overall review of all pay rates at the Theatre. Any amendments will be implemented in 2020.

The Theatre recognises that, in contrast to other disciplines, theatre directors do not have a representative organisation. Consequently, in moving forward, the Theatre will work to ensure that it communicates very specifically with members of this profession.

4. *Meetings with Writers / The Writers Guild of Ireland*

This meeting gave the Writers Guild and the representatives of the signatories the first opportunity to meet the Abbey Theatre's recently-appointed Dramaturg. This discussion provided clarification around the Theatre's commissioning policy. The Abbey Theatre committed to the following actions:

- 4.1.** By 3 May 2019, to ensure that, at the first display of a show on the Abbey Theatre's website (i.e. on the landing page), the playwright's name will be clearly displayed beneath the title of the play.
- 4.2.** By 31 May 2019, the Abbey Theatre will share its plans (based on discussions with the Writers Guild) for the creation of a rate card, proposing minimum fees for writers working with the Abbey Theatre.
- 4.3.** At a date to be agreed with them, the Dramaturg will speak to members of the Writers Guild.

The Writers Guild and the Abbey Theatre committed to the following action:

- 4.4.** By 26 April 2019, to jointly review the Abbey Theatre's 'New Work' section on the website to ensure there is clarity in the messaging to writers.

5. *Meeting with Producers / Technicians / AIST*

This meeting focused on the issue of how co-productions are developed and realised. Clarity was also provided in relation to the contractual status of shows in the Abbey Theatre's programme. The Abbey Theatre committed to the following actions:

- 5.1.** By 26 April 2019, to insert a statement on its website, to the effect: 'If you are interested in co-producing with the Abbey Theatre, please submit your proposal here'.
- 5.2.** With immediate effect, to ensure that the crediting on all its shows, both on its website and printed material, will accurately reflect the contract status of each show.
- 5.3.** In line with other disciplines, the fee rates for technicians will be reviewed as part of an overall review of all pay rates at the Theatre. Any amendments will be implemented in 2020.

Going Forward

The Abbey Theatre has learned from this dialogue process, and is firmly committed to enhancing the quality of its engagement with all theatre disciplines by establishing clear, accessible and timely communications. This enhancement will be achieved by developing its relationship with industry representatives on a more formal basis, and by ensuring that its communications meet the information needs of those who work in the theatre sector in Ireland.

The full implementation of the actions to which the Theatre has committed will be monitored by the Board of the Abbey Theatre and will be reported on to the Arts Council.

The Abbey Theatre is aware that, as Ireland's National Theatre, it should lead by example in setting high benchmarks in the treatment of artists and in theatre practice. The Theatre hopes this dialogue process has reassured the sector of its position as a producing theatre, primarily providing employment and opportunity for Irish and Irish-based practitioners. In line with the Abbey Theatre's 2019-2023 Strategy, the Theatre intends to continue forging new partnerships with artists and companies, enabling work of the highest standard to be supported by the National Theatre and building on the success of existing partnerships.

As the major beneficiary of public funding for theatre in Ireland, the Abbey Theatre rightfully comes under the brightest spotlight. The Abbey Theatre welcomes the Government's commitment to increase funding for the arts and it looks forward to engaging with stakeholders, including the Arts Council, and working alongside fellow theatre makers to create an environment where great, well supported theatre can thrive across Ireland.

The Abbey Theatre
30 April 2019