



ABBAY THEATRE
AMHARCLANN
NA MAINISTREACH

**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 and compiled in Appendix 1.

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. See Appendix 2.

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

Appendix 1 - Timeline of agreed actions by the Abbey Theatre in order of date of delivery
[Each action is cross-referenced to the relevant section of the Report]

Ref #	Agreed Action	Date	Status
2.1	The Abbey Theatre will reinstate a vouched expenses budget of €500 for costume designers.	Immediate	Complete
5.2	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.	Immediate	Complete
1.1	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.	15-Mar-19	Complete
4.4	To jointly review with the Writers Guild the Abbey Theatre's 'New Work' section on the website to ensure there is clarity in the messaging to writers.	26-Apr-19	Response awaited from Writers Guild
5.1	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'.	26-Apr-19	Complete
2.2	The Abbey Theatre will share with the ISSSD and representatives of the signatories the minimum fee rates for all categories of designers across the Abbey and Peacock stages.	26-Apr-19	Complete
4.1	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.	03-May-19	On Target
1.2	The Abbey Theatre will meet with Irish Equity to continue discussions in relation to pay rates.	08-May-19	On Target
1.3	The Abbey Theatre will provide a timetabled plan of action to reinstate a permanent casting presence at the Theatre.	17-May-19	On Target

Ref #	Agreed Action	Date	Status
2.3	The Abbey Theatre will respond to the representatives of the signatories on a request for the provision of a dedicated design room in the current building.	28-May-19	On Target
3.1	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.	28-May-19	On Target
4.2	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.	31-May-19	On Target
2.4	The Abbey Theatre will provide an update on the structure of the Costume Department.	26-Jun-19	On Target
2.5	In consultation with 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.	26-Jun-19	On Target
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.	26-Jun-19	On Target
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.	26-Jun-19	On Target
4.3	At a date to be agreed with the Writers Guild, the Dramaturg will speak to members of the Writers Guild.	TBA	Target to be set

Appendix 2 - Letter of 7 January 2019

Dear Minister,

It is with regret that we, the undersigned theatre practitioners, write to apprise you of our deep concern and dissatisfaction with the direction that The Abbey Theatre has taken since the appointment of its Directors, Neil Murray and Graham McLaren. The grace period since their arrival is well and truly over and the situation in which the Irish theatre community finds itself is now critical. While the institution may be financially buoyant – and due congratulations for this – the freelance theatre community, in particular, has been cast adrift.

The changing artistic model of producing fewer in-house productions and presenting or co-presenting more has caused devastation amongst our ranks. Although the management's strategy of offering diversity to their own audiences is admirable in theory, it offers up several problems in practice. The National Theatre reducing its own production output means less diversity, and reduced employment, not more. There will not have been an Ireland-based actor in an Abbey Theatre production on an Abbey stage since Jimmy's Hall ended on 8 September 2018 until *The Country Girls* opens on 23 February 2019. That is five and a half months without an Ireland-based actor directly employed by the Abbey.

The numbers are stark and are worth stating. In 2016 the Abbey directly employed 123 actors in Abbey productions and 90 actors in readings and workshops. Then, in 2017 the Abbey directly employed only 56 actors. No figures are available for readings or workshops that year. Fifty six. That is a reduction of 46% of actors appearing on stage directly employed by our National Theatre. We would surmise that this reduction will be substantially higher when workshop figures are made available for 2017. Though the casting and employment statistics have been removed from the Abbey website, an approximate calculation for 2018 is 65 actors employed directly by the Abbey. In a theatre founded by writers and actors it is profoundly worrying that there is no commitment to sustaining that community.

There are a number of other factors that would appear to contribute to the shrinking employment opportunities and we have endeavoured to clarify these below.

- The Abbey receives the lion's share of available funding - €6.8m in 2018, with an additional €200,000- touring grant. With the Abbey now co-producing with the major independents, whilst receiving 10.25% of the overall Arts Council budget, it now also benefits from the production budgets of some of the better-funded independent companies. A clear case of double funding.
- Despite The Abbey being in receipt of 50% of the Arts Council's entire Drama budget; and now extra resources from other companies; our Actors, Directors and Designers are being paid less when working at the Abbey than before and for shorter runs. They are

being contracted in the Abbey by the co-producer - an independent company that offers lesser rates. This reduction in pay can be as much as 25%.

- Independent productions, which would previously have found a home elsewhere, are now being housed at the Abbey. Thus venues, which were developed to host Ireland's independent companies, now have gaps in their calendars. This has the knock on effect of reducing employment in these venues.
- Contracts for working weeks that would have previously been on offer from Independent companies to freelance Technicians have been reduced, covered as they are in these co-productions/co-presentations by Abbey permanent staff.
- Not a single National Theatre contract has been given to an Irish-based Set Designer on the main stage in either 2017 or 2018.
- The abolition of the Casting Department has created a significant disconnect with Actors. The tradition of open auditions for graduate and young actors is no longer available. There is no single person with experience and responsibility for casting with whom actors and their agents can build a relationship or who can mentor up and coming talent.
- This year's Christmas offering on the National Theatre main stage has for so many become the final straw. Any critical questioning of the wisdom of the Irish National Theatre using its resources to facilitate a Canadian commercial management's seven week stop-over, before going into the West End, have been cynically framed as xenophobic and little islander. This disingenuous accusation is beneath contempt, and we dismiss it with as much alacrity as the Abbey management dismisses the employment of its local workers over Christmas. Irish audiences deserve to have access to shows of this international reputation coming from and going to Broadway and the West End: but of course they already have, in our various No1 receiving venues.
- To believe that our National Theatre needs to engage with audiences in Ireland, but not its Theatre professionals is a fallacy. The current working practices in The Abbey Theatre – The National Theatre of Ireland are in direct opposition to the priorities as set out in the Government's Culture 2025 document, The Arts Council's Making Great Art Work policy, as well as their own mission statement.

Irish Art and Culture are internationally held in high regard. Consequently, our Artists have over many years done the State sterling service. At home and abroad our talents and expertise have been at the heart of promoting Tourism, and in developing international relationships for trade and negotiation. Our Theatre workers have been at the frontline of 'Brand Ireland', only time and again to return home to live on the poverty line. The reduction in the proportion of Abbey Theatre budget going to Ireland-based Performers, Directors and Designers serves to rub further salt in the wound.

We respectfully ask that The National Theatre engages in a greater percentage of in-house productions, as opposed to co-productions or buy-ins. It is the proportion which is so damaging, so heedless.

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.

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