



## ABBAY THEATRE AMHARCLANN NA MAINISTREACH

Last week, a young transition year student told me theatre was still important “because it’s the only place in the world you get to experience things without having to live through them.” An astute and pertinent understanding. The Good Friday Agreement signed 25 years ago, means that girl, her entire generation and those that follow, will only experience the tragedy of the Northern Irish conflict vicariously, we hope. Peace, of course, has no final draft, but is a work in progress. And, whilst the audience may be divided, we are *still* watching, *still* listening, *still* reflecting.

Theatre emerged from the cradle of democracy so we might understand ourselves and each other better. A National Theatre, The Abbey, should not only tell the story of an evolving nation and its place in the world but should force us to consider who and what we might become.

I am a passionate believer in the power of theatre to change lives. Theatre can shift perspectives incrementally. It is an empathy machine. When Yeats and Gregory founded the Abbey, their vision was to “...bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland.” We here at The Abbey-safeguard that vision – that theatre must speak to the cultural, social, and political moment.

Of course we look to the past to consider a future. When I became Artistic Director, I reflected on a century of partition with a programme that looked forward, asking: where are we now, as an island—as a people—and what is to be our future? Culture evolves, and some of the binary preoccupations of 25 years ago seem less urgent today, and yet, in many ways we are having the same conversation; Brexit has thrust the Good Friday Agreement back into the news cycle.

In 1994, Patrick Mason, then Artistic Director, programmed Frank McGuinness’ *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, to reflect the “enormous importance of the IRA ceasefire and the momentum of the whole peace process.” Much was made of the unionist politicians travelling south for opening night; change had begun, it was real and it was happening right where you are sitting tonight. We are very proud to host this highly significant event here with Department of Foreign Affairs.

So where will we be in another 25 years? Who knows, but the Abbey is here to hold the conversation, help ask the questions and let us practice, without living through, a future as yet unwritten.

- Caitríona McLaughlin, Abbey Theatre Artistic Director