

MIKE MCGRATH-BRYAN

M.A. Journalism with New Media, CIT

Selected Features Journalism & Content Work

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

GENDER REBELS: FIGHTING FOR RIGHTS AND VISIBILITY <i>(Evening Echo, August 31st 2018)</i>	3
MOVEMBER: “IT’S AN AWFUL SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM” <i>(Evening Echo, November 13th 2017)</i>	7
REBEL READS: TURNING THE PAGE <i>(Totally Cork, September 2018)</i>	10
FRANCISCAN WELL: FEM-ALE PRESSURE <i>(Evening Echo, July 26th 2018)</i>	12
CORK VINTAGE MAP: OF A CERTAIN VINTAGE <i>(Totally Cork, December 6th 2016)</i>	14
THE RUBBERBANDITS: HORSE SENSE <i>(Evening Echo, December 12, 2016)</i>	16
LANKUM: ON THE CUSP OF THE UNKNOWN <i>(Village Magazine, November 2017)</i>	19
CAOIMHÍN O’RAGHALLAIGH: “IT’S ABOUT FINDING THE RIGHT SPACE” <i>(RTÉ Culture, September 6th 2018)</i>	25
THE JAZZ AT 40: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE <i>(Evening Echo: Jazz Festival Special, October 17th 2017)</i>	28
CORK MIDSUMMER FESTIVAL: THE COLLABORATIVE MODEL <i>(Totally Cork, May 2018)</i>	31
DRUID THEATRE: “VERY AWARE OF ITSELF” <i>(Evening Echo, February 12th 2018)</i>	33
CORK CITY BALLET: EN POINTE <i>(Evening Echo, September 3rd, 2018)</i>	35

GENDER REBELS: FIGHTING FOR RIGHTS AND VISIBILITY

(Evening Echo, August 31st 2018)

Gender Rebels are a group dedicated to working on the rights of transgender, intersex and non-binary people in Cork City, negotiating obstacles both infrastructural and everyday, and providing an outlet for social events and peer support. Mike McGrath-Bryan speaks with chairperson Jack Fitzgerald.

With Pride month in the rear view mirror for another year, and celebrations around the country winding down, it's easy to bask in the colour, pomp and circumstance that the weekend's proceedings confer on the city. Inclusivity and visibility have traditionally been at the heart of Pride celebrations, stemming from its roots in civil rights protest. But with criticism mounting in recent times of co-option by major sponsors of the Pride movement, the importance of maintaining that visibility for the city's LGBT* community on a day-to-day basis has been drawn into sharp focus. For transgender, intersex, non-binary and otherwise gender non-conforming individuals, representation and community has historically been of utmost importance in the absence of substantial infrastructural assistance, with this year seeing Dublin host Ireland's first ever Trans Pride march.

Enter Gender Rebels, a group formed last year to provide peer support and social outlets with a distinctly Corkonian identity. For chairperson Jack Fitzgerald, being part of its foundation was about strengthening connections between people in the city. "The last peer support group in Cork had kind of wound down, and (advocacy group) TENI was looking for something to fill the gap. Just from other things, they knew who I was, called me and asked would I be interested in taking up the peer support group. From looking at what the support group did and the resources it had, I kind-of figured that I might as well do my own thing here, that wasn't connected to any organisation. I thought that would give us more of a voice and more visibility."

Last November saw the group's inaugural AGM, at the Village Hall community venue on Patrick's Quay. With the event's agenda ranging from social events to addressing the wider infrastructural needs of Cork transgender, non-binary and intersex communities, reaching a consensus among members before settling on a mission statement was a considered process. "It took a while. When I set the AGM, the community was very dispersed in Cork, there wasn't one epicentre for people. Loads of people are online, in online groups, that's where we advertised it, we got the name out there, as well as networking with people we know, and we booked the space in The Village Hall upstairs for the AGM. It was surprisingly well-attended, about 50 people, which was absolutely fantastic. There, we just said what each wanted from the scene in Cork, what we were looking for, and then, from that, hearing stories. From there, I was able to pull together a steering group, we set it up and outlined the aims of our community, how to raise awareness, and then also to try and get better resources for ourselves here in the city."

Among the key items on the agenda, and one that has defined the group subsequently, has been that of addressing the needs of the city's community, in different ways. Recent years have seen an upsurge in national awareness of the issues facing trans, non-binary and intersex people, but on a local level, Gender Rebels have been putting in the work on educating others on the issues that affect people on a daily basis. "The big one is if you're wishing to transition and get onto HRT, there's no services in Cork for you. You have to go to either Galway or Dublin, and the waiting list for Loughlinstown in Dublin is twenty months. There's no guarantee that you'll get onto HRT after that time, either. They're using a very outdated mode of care for trans people, they're not applying themselves to the international standard, the WPAT. There's a movement in Dublin, This is Me, trying to get the international standard of care brought in. The other issue is people don't know. They don't know what being trans is, don't know what being intersex is. If you're an individual trying to access a support or service, the people you're dealing with don't know what you are. That can be very difficult. People that are going to their GPs or their counsellors are often in the position where they are the educator, and that can be very difficult as they may not know everything themselves, but they are expected to. Other people may choose not to come out because of that, so they may use a service in the city and people may not know they're trans because they don't want to have that conversation."

Among the biggest issues facing the community in Cork at present, is the coarsening of discussion on the topic of gender, thanks in no small part to the rise in agenda-driven online debate channels and personalities. Recurring jokes and memes belittling minority social groups have been a pillar of their online strategies, and Jack has seen the attrition on discourse in his everyday life. "You get the people that think this is some new fad that just came up, don't realise there's a history to it, thinking that it's okay to have "debates" with trans, non-binary and intersex people. This could be a person just going about their day, and all of a sudden, they'll meet an individual that has this pre-planned debate, made out in their head. You'd be, y'know, just trying to get your coffee. You don't want to be debating if the 'they' pronoun is singular or not. I just want to have a coffee. You're always expected to 'perform'. Part of that is, as the gay and lesbian movements have picked up acceptance, visibility and allies, they're no longer the 'easy target'. Trans people are likely to be more vulnerable or isolated, so they might be an easier target for this stuff."

Another stated goal for the group has been garnering better resources with which to work, and provide spaces for people from the community to meet up and support one another. The processes of dealing with officialdom and venues around the city have been relatively easy for the group, with goodwill being extended from different quarters. "It's been very positive. I was volunteering with Cork Community Art Link, who are at the Lido (in Blackpool). I had asked them if we could avail of the space and they were more than happy to give us that space. So, while you do have those people online that are anti-gay, or anti-trans, the average person is more than willing to be accepting, almost like they can't do enough for you, and it's really been heartwarming to see that. People are really kind, or if they don't know, say, the right way to go about things, they just ask questions like 'how can I support you better?', which is really encouraging. Interestingly, we have had difficulty in accessing (lesbian and gay spaces), but it is getting better. The Cork Gay Project has recently changed their remit to include trans men, which is really encouraging. Bi Ireland has been fantastic. I'm surprised by the amount of trans people in bi groups in Ireland. They're an accepting space and they've made sure that they're an accepting space."

With the polarisation of online discussion and subsequent second-hand talk, it could be difficult for some people to know where to begin getting up to speed on matters pertaining to the city's trans, non-binary and intersex communities. Discussion regarding preferred pronouns, gender identities and trans rights have come to the surface in recent years, but for Fitzgerald, knowing how to help starts with the everyday ways in which people interact and support each other. "The biggest one is, first and foremost, view us as human. There's a lot of 'othering' that can happen. Some people can be so different to you, so out of your norm, that it's easy to other them, but when you do that, you dehumanise them. Just realise that we are human and the vast majority of us want to live our lives. I'd be very unusual, by being very proactive and advocating for trans rights, but the majority want to live their lives and get on with things. The second one is, if someone has come out to you, and has changed their pronouns, to just respect those pronouns, try and use them. I know it can be difficult if you know someone for a long time to change to a new name and new pronouns, especially if it's 'they' as a singular. It can take a while to get used to it. If you do make a mistake, misuse pronouns, etc., what works best, I find, is to say sorry and move on. One thing that often happens is someone will get the wrong pronoun, and then spend the next half-hour saying sorry for it. It comes from a place of kindness... if it's an accident, it's an accident. It happens."

Another pillar of the group's remit is raising the local profile of the community in Cork, with this awareness feeding into the main aim of better resources and support in the city. To this end, creating visibility has been a major part of the group's activities. "I think the mere fact that we exist has created a lot of awareness. I'm after getting phone calls or emails from people where a family member has come out, or they have a client who's trans, and they go online because they don't know anything about it, they Google it and they find us. We're a place for them to ask their questions. Another one is having been involved in Pride this year, which allowed us to have our own trans event. In UCC, I'd do a lot of talks... when anyone calls us asking to do a talk, I'd always raise my hand. During the Repeal campaign, I was asked to provide my perspective as a trans person. Y'know, we have meetups and social events, we do so in public, to reinforce the idea that there's nothing wrong with being trans. We can exist in public spaces. When we launched the group, a gay man came up to me and said he thought it was unusual that we would have gatherings in public. He said he knew two trans women that wouldn't "pass", didn't 'look' female, and because of that they shouldn't be out in public. It's that kind of thing we want to challenge. We are as entitled as anyone to be in these spaces."

While the social events include coffee gatherings, nights out and games nights in places like Tabletop and Barcadia, an important offering for the group is a closed-doors peer support group at the Lido, happening monthly. Provided is an accepting space for people to present themselves as who they are, with group discussions, workshops and changing facilities available. "Mainly, we meet up in cafes. It's a lot more chill for people. If you saw us sitting around, you wouldn't twig that we are trans, non-binary or intersex. We just look like everyone else. We get people that go to our peer support meetings, those are closed spaces, people can be 'more' themselves, can dress the way they want, act the way they want. Some people can be more reserved in public, depending on how 'out' they are and where they are in their transition. It's a place to support each other, discuss their experiences. If someone is just coming out, don't know where they fit, groups like this are very handy, they can hear stories, ask questions. Oftentimes, it's the first space (people) have been in where they're 'out', or the norm, they're not

‘unusual’. And just to have that, where they’re not the different person in the room, can be very liberating.”

The group has come along in leaps and bounds, with another AGM due later in the year, advocacy work ongoing, and social activities planned throughout. Fitzgerald points to ongoing growth and hard graft. “To grow bigger, have more events. Weekly events. Down the line, our own centre or space. When you look at Belfast, they have the Trans Resource Centre there. Seeing what they’ve done up there, we’d love to have something similar up there, where you can get resources and info. Another thing is more of an online presence, at the moment, we’re all based on Facebook. We want to move from that to our own website, so that will be a resource to access, as people might be afraid of using socials, others might not know they’re out, etc. There’s a few other things lined up, but right now it’s about getting stable, growing and building our community.”

For more information on upcoming peer support groups and social activities, email genderrebelscork@gmail.com, or find Gender Rebels on Facebook.

MOVEMBER: “IT’S AN AWFUL SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM”

(Evening Echo, November 13th 2017)

For many men, the discovery and treatment of cancer and other illnesses can be a very close shave. The Movember campaign, now in its ninth year, aims to grow awareness of the importance of men’s health and issues. Mike McGrath-Bryan speaks with Movember campaigner Ashley Hobbs on his Movember experiences.

For the past nine years, the annual Movember campaign has done unprecedented work on the national and regional levels for creating awareness and raising funds for men’s physical health issues. The idea, if it has somehow escaped your notice in recent years, is for participants to shave their beards on the first of November (see what they did there?), and over the following thirty days, cultivate a handsome soup-strainer & document its progress. Throughout the month, as with the rest of the year, the onus is on participants to discuss the importance of getting checked for illnesses like prostate cancer, and just as importantly, raise funds in their communities for the cause via sponsorship, events or other means.

Rowing in behind the cause in Cork City this year are John “Coach” Kavanagh, mixed martial artist and coach for UFC champion Conor McGregor, and his brother, Snapchat-famous media personality James Kavanagh. Speaking at the event’s launch recently, John Kavanagh spoke on his motivations for mucking in, new campaigns, and Growing a Mo’. “I am getting behind the Movember 2017 campaign because I know men are not talking about their health enough, both physical and mental, and we need to get a big conversation going, so men know what they can do to safeguard their future health. I am really impressed with the Movember MOVE initiative, as I think it is important for physical and mental health that men get moving. MOVE is great because it’s not about being the fittest or the fastest, it’s about having fun, doing good, while raising funds along the way.” A social media superstar in his own right, James Kavanagh added: “Movember is not just about growing a moustache for November! People should log on to Movember.com to register and get involved, and raise funds by hosting your own event or donating online.”

Corkman Ashley Hobbs is partaking in Movember again this year after growing a mo’ in previous years as part of the campaign, having been directly impacted by cancer in his lifetime, and helping others emerge on the other side. “Everyone is affected by cancer in some shape or form, be it a relative or a friend or family member. My own father was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Thankfully, he came through it, mainly down to early detection and hard work by medical professionals. My grandfather died of prostate cancer, I know numerous friends and family that have had cancer down through the years, and that’s the main reason why I got behind Movember.” Since launching in Ireland in 2008, Movember has been the primary funder of prostate cancer initiatives around the country through a working relationship with the Irish Cancer Society. The crux of the campaign is the fact that most cancers are treatable and preventable, through a combination of early detection and small, manageable lifestyle changes. For Hobbs, this knowledge is something he wishes he knew while heading into his father’s cancer journey. “When you first hear the words ‘it’s cancer’, it’s an awful shock to the system. Years ago you daredn’t

even mention the ‘c-word’. It’s something you didn’t even talk about, like if someone had cancer, ‘oh god, that’s it, he’s finished’. When I first heard those two words with my own father, it was shock, it was disbelief. It’s a case of ‘was there a mistake, are we sure about the results?’ You automatically assume it’s a death sentence. What I wish I’d know going in is that many cancers are treatable, and recovery is possible. That’s the biggest thing.”

Movember goes into its ninth year in Ireland in 2017, and has become a cultural phenomenon, coinciding as its emergence did with such happenings as the return of the moustache as part of mainstream fashion, even inspiring legions of knockoff, mustachioed clothing in high-street shops (none of which benefited the charity despite selling off the back of its popularity). At time of interview, Hobbs was on day eight of his 2017 moustache, feeling good about the year’s campaign. “The fuzz has taken hold (laughs). I’d to put a little note on the shaving mirrors at home, not to shave the moustache ‘cause it’s a habit. Friends, family and colleagues have been very generous. Everyone has been affected in some shape or form by cancer, and when they hear about a worthy cause, they can be very, very generous. Last year was my most successful year, and this year we’ll push on as well. As I call it, Movember month. At the start of the month I went on Facebook and apologised in advance before I start sharing away. But people are very generous not only with money, but with their time and initiative. They just sometimes need a nudge, but people are good souls, they rise to the challenge.”

Amid all the fun and the broader social goals are some hard numbers to contend with. Neil Rooney, national lead on the Movember project, recently said in a statement: “Movember has set a 2030 target to reduce the number of men dying prematurely by 25%. Men are dying an average of 6 years younger than women, and we want to highlight ways to tackle this.” Hobbs, having been through the wringer on more than one occasion, is more than able to testify to the difference the awareness that Movember generates makes. “It’s been mainly through Facebook and Twitter, as well as work. This year, we’re offering that the highest donation gets to shave it off! (laughs) Mainly through social media, getting out there, discussing it and talking about it. I’ve had numerous conversations with people that you wouldn’t realise had been affected by cancer, or suicide, or mental health, all off the back of a couple of silly pictures of me with the moustache, and updating it through the month.”

An often-underestimated point of the cancer recovery journey is that of mental health, both for patients and their loved ones, with the shock and displacement of the initial diagnosis giving way to uncertainty, stress and worry. However, the Movember campaign has coincided with the rise in awareness over the austerity years of the importance of maintaining one’s mental health. Opening up, sharing experiences and continuing to talk is key, as Hobbs and his father can attest to. “It’s much more open. People will have a conversation with you, be it about their own experiences, those of a family member, friend, or whatever. You do see it an awful lot more, people are a lot more aware of the issues. It’s through talking, early detection and counselling, that whether it’s cancer or mental health issues, if people just reach out, that alone can make an awful difference... the normal channels can be very much (health-focused). Saying that, my father had to travel to Galway for his own treatment. There’s no way he could have travelled up and down, gone to hospital for treatments, etc., so the likes of CancerCare West, who put him up in their hostels overnight, and while he was there... for an example, he did yoga one night (laughs). My father’s very old-school, and just even being where other people had it, and was able to talk to others,

I think that helped an awful lot. It's not something the older generation want to talk about, but people have to realise it's not a death sentence in all cases"

The issue of men's healthcare is especially important and urgent in the greater Munster area, where the issue of prostate cancer in particular is need of addressing, according to Rooney. "According to the National Cancer Registry of Ireland, there has been an average of almost 900 cases of prostate cancer diagnosed in Munster since 2005. We want men suffering from prostate cancer to maintain control of their lives as they undergo treatment, improve their mobility, mental wellbeing and, ultimately, their quality of life. With these statistics in mind, Hobbs is keen for people to keep in mind the endgoal of Movember, and dispenses advice to prospective Mo' Bros. "Keep growing the Mo's. Cancer will be beaten. It's something we need to talk about. Keep talking about it, raise the profile. Men are stubborn. They don't talk, they don't go to the doctor. 'Sure, it'll be grand'. But if they leave it too long, it might not be."

REBEL READS: TURNING THE PAGE

(Totally Cork, September 2018)

With progressives and community activists more mobilised than ever in recent years, the time was coming for a hub for ideas, thoughts and events. Enter Rebel Reads, a new community bookshop and co-operative space on Father Mathew Quay. Mike McGrath-Bryan speaks with co-ordinator Declan Synnott.

The tide has turned in Ireland in recent years. Our well-documented conversion from a once-conservative island fealty to a diverse, forward-looking nation has been an increasingly common international media story. The last thirty years have seen everything, from the decriminalisation of homosexuality and divorce, to liberalisation of laws regarding marriage equality and reproductive rights. The latter saw an unprecedented civic partnership of social and political groups come together, to push for citizen's assemblies and eventual referenda on these matters, leading to hard-fought but decisive results in its favour. The question of 'what next' has many answers, and a great many debates are to be had regarding civil partnership among community groups and progressive political factions.

But on a local level, taking that energy and organisation forward and building on the work of the Together for Yes campaign was of vital importance, especially in the light of the loss of community arts spaces in recent years. Rebel Reads, a community bookshop and organisation space on Father Matthew Quay, occupies the campaign's former headquarters, and as co-ordinator Declan Synnott reveals, came from the desire to move things forward. "An initial callout was made via Solidarity Books' Facebook page. Solidarity Books was an anarchist bookshop on Douglas Street, which closed in 2015. People were attempting to reorganise, and we began holding meetings every few weeks to discuss how we'd go about it. The plan was to have a physical space with a bookshop running out of it, that would be acting as facilitators for radical, left-leaning political activities and organising, but also open to cultural and creative activities on the independent level in the city."

The process of assembling a team and reaching consensus on a mission statement, while building on effort and enthusiasm, had to be taken seriously. In carrying on from Solidarity Books, a hefty precedent exists, and providing a progressive space requires solid policy and a plan. "Within those meeting was an overt focus on dialogue and discussing what individuals wanted and what the city needed, and start to organise according to ability to start to address these issues. That meant setting up working groups, so there was a policy group, for organisation and operation, PR groups for social media and engaging with the outside world. But there was always the understanding that they would be coming from a left-leaning background, working toward the end of social change. That was the discussion, understanding that that's what we wanted."

The idea of a multi-use space grew from these discussions. The process of taking ideas from different sources on board, and putting them all in one place to set about actioning them, has been essential to its development and general pitch to the public. "Part of our view is wanting to enable people to do what they want to do, or need to do, in the city. So, we've always had something of an open call for people to

come and propose uses of the space, and we've attempted to enable people to do that by themselves, so that we would be in a facilitation role, providing resources. Again, it's a conversation, we talk to them, see what their needs and our capabilities are, and find common ground."

Community spaces right now in the city are at a premium as gentrification continues, which makes the shop's existence even more important at this time. The response, support and interaction from other community organisations has been essential to its development. "It's all been incredibly positive, people have been supportive. The space we're in came through Cork Together for Yes, a lot of us were involved, and we're, as is our policy, a pro-choice organisation, so that was one very natural relationship. But lots of people from varying backgrounds have been involved, and it's been a positive response, whether it's wanting to collaborate or showing support. There is that understanding that having community-focused, non-profit spaces in the cities is getting harder. People tacitly understand our existence is precarious, and want to help work to secure it. We knew space might be transient, and the nature of the rental market, gentrification, our government not really caring about how these things happen once profit is generated. But part of our commitment is to always fight for this to happen, and so many people feel the same way, cares, and reaches out."

In terms of events – there's screenings and plans for quiet gigs, and there's already been cookouts and repair shops. The role of events in the space's development is that of creating a destination for all manner of interests. "We have regular things, a screening every Friday, music. We have vegan food nights, repair cafes. All of those things are about community outreach, where people feel comfortable coming into a space where paying in isn't essential, where we can do donations or keep admittance as low as we can, and that emphasises how we operate as a bookshop as well. We have couches, we want people to come in, drink some free tea, hang out and feel like they don't have to pay any money to be in a space. Having these events is to have a sense of like-minded people, sharing an experience, and fostering a sense of co-operation and unity. Cities are alienating places, and spaces like this are where you find support."

What's in the future for the space, and what is its importance in light of the changes happening to the city over the next decade? "I believe that people will always come in with great new ideas. Keeping that open to external ideas, and letting those develop more, and more. It's gonna add to what's there and assist in changing things. We're not focused on development for profit-making. We're focused on aiding communities and positive, radical social and political change, and we're always going to be dedicated to that. Offering support, a view to alternatives, and a sense that people care, people care beyond monetary value, about individuals."

FRANCISCAN WELL: FEM-ALE PRESSURE

(Evening Echo, July 26th 2018)

With craft beer now firmly at the heart of pubs and venues around the country, women are staking their claim in a rapidly-changing business. Enter the Franciscan Well's Kate Clancy, who's spearheading the first all-women craft beer festival on August 10th and 11th. She tells Mike McGrath-Bryan about the idea and how it happened.

The rise of craft beer over the past five years or more has been inexorable: local and regional breweries have become part of the national retail landscape, while home-brewed options have made appearances on taps around the county alongside the brewery giants. Since its takeover by Molson Coors, the Cork-based Franciscan Well has been at the vanguard of this insurgency, leveraging the increased distribution at its disposal with a unique offering of specialty beers and ales, countering the craft-branded alternate offerings marketed to casual drinkers by its parent company's rivals. It's against this background of innovation and growth that the latest initiative undertaken by the brewery's pub emerges: Fem-Ale festival, happening on August 10th and 11th at the quayside superpub.

Talks, musical performances, panels and even Saturday morning pilates sessions make the event's first annual excursion, which aims to open up the conversation around gender equality in craft brewing, according to the venue's marketing head, Kate Clancy. "I've been working in the Franciscan Well now for three years as their marketing manager. Over the past three years, I have been attending and running beer festivals in Cork. Most events I attend, I normally would end up being the only female attending. This was very noticeable at our last festival, the Spring Beer Festival, which is Ireland's longest running beer festival. I felt that there has to be women in Cork that are interested in Craft beer but may not feel comfortable in attending these events. I wanted to share with people just how welcoming the beer industry is to everyone, and showcase the women that have been part of the success of the industry in Ireland. Also a female-led beer festival hasn't yet been held in Ireland, and considering we are celebrating our twentieth year brewing, and that it is The Year of the Woman, I thought, 'why not do something different?'."

She might just have a point – craft alcohol has something of a boys' club around it, but the task of finding other brewpubs and home breweries led by women wasn't the challenge Clancy quite had in mind, either. "It's been amazing. It's snowballed! Once I got in touch with one woman, they were very quick to mention another woman working in some aspect or other of the beer industry, and everyone has helped me to put the list of attendees together (specifically) to ensure no-one was left out! It's been a pleasure of a festival to organise."

In terms of the layout of the event, how does it break down between tastings and panels/discussions, and regarding the latter, how were themes agreed upon and reached? "Like all our beer festivals, we will have a bar with over twenty taps set up in the beerhall. Of course all beers that will be pouring will be beers that have been brewed by women. At this stage, I have over thirteen Irish brewers, which is a lot more than what I thought I'd get! As the festival is focused on showcasing women in the industry, the talks will

play a major role over the weekend. They'll start on Friday evening with Melissa Cole, followed by a panel discussion with brewers like Kinnegar Brewing's Rachel & Libby, and West Kerry's Adrienne. The talks will resume on Saturday at 2pm, and will be a combination of panel discussions of brewers, journalists, graphic designers, marketers, Christina Wade, the founder of the Ladies' Craft Beer Society of Ireland, and Edana Hinchy, director of the Craft Brew Labs. There is no specific theme for the speeches, as all the women are coming from different backgrounds. The idea is for them to share their experiences in the industry, and also shed some light on how to get involved."

The guest of honour is journalist, sommelier and food expert Melissa Cole – a pioneering professional who has blazed a trail for women in specialist service industries. Her importance as a gala headliner, for lack of a better term, cannot be underestimated, especially as part of the festival's first year. "First off, we couldn't run a Female festival without asking Melissa, she has done amazing work and is an inspiration to any woman in the craft beer industry. Melissa has been fighting against sexism in the beer industry for twenty years now, and it is an honour to have her speak, and share her experiences at the festival. Everyone is looking forward to meeting her, especially me!" Part of the event's remit is reaching out to women who would like to be involved with the craft beer industry. Outreach measures are being taken at the event, and followed up on after by the brewery, in addition to the given networking opportunities such an event possesses. "I would hope that the event itself is the first measure to get more women involved, especially in Cork, and again the talks might inspire! I am hoping to run a series of follow-up events after the festival, e.g. tasting nights and tap takeovers. Christina has set up the Ladies' Craft Beer Society of Ireland, which is based in Dublin, so I'm hoping to set up a Cork based one after the event. I will also be collecting emails over the weekend (and getting in touch)."

That spirit makes its way down to the entertainment on offer across the weekend, as the stage is set for some of Cork's busiest musicians to showcase themselves and their work. "On Friday night, we'll have Christiana Underwood and friends taking to the stage, with soul & reggae music. Saturday from 3pm, we'll have member of local band She Said, and Saturday at 8pm, all-woman vocal trio Koa, off their residency at the Bridge pub on Bridge Street. All females, and all Cork-based!" As the Fran Well looks set to continue a national expansion that has seen its cans land on supermarket shelves and at festivals & events all over the country, the pub where it all started on North Mall continues apace, and preparations are in place for a special anniversary later this year. "We can't say much about it just yet, but our biggest event to date will be in November, as we'll celebrate our twentieth birthday. Watch this space."

CORK VINTAGE MAP: OF A CERTAIN VINTAGE

(Totally Cork, December 6th 2016)

Mike McGrath-Bryan speaks with Eilís Dillon, of Records & Relics, about the Cork Vintage Map, a unique collaborative initiative between thirteen of Cork City's specialist retailers.

It seems like such a simple idea, that it must have been hard to come by amid all of its constituent parts. The Cork Vintage Map, released this past month and available at flyer/leaflet stops across the city, brings together the city's eclectic community of busy vintage traders, from antiquarians, to outfitters and stylists, to record-slingers. Dotted around the city's side-streets and corners, the Map forms a trail of must-visit locations for avid retro enthusiasts. Eilís Dillon, of Records & Relics on Lancaster Quay, says the project was a while in the works. "It's something I think a lot of us have been talking about for years, but it never really materialised. There was an event earlier this year by TEDxCorkSalon, called CorkLovesVintage, a lot of us were speaking at it, or in attendance, and it gave us all a very warm fuzzy feeling. We were all chatting about it again, and I decided to make it happen!"

The word "vintage", of course, makes for a broad church to say the least, with different demographics getting older and appreciating the bits and bobs of the past at different paces, from older, nostalgic crowds, to kids that are well-used to returning trends, reboots and remakes. When attempting to set a definition. "Vintage simply means that the item is at least 25 years old. So, we are talking '80s, and anything before then."

Taking in everything from fashion, with the outfitters from Mercury Goes Retrograde and Brocade & Lime among others, to hairdressers and technicians like CHAIR and the Pink Octopus Dreadshop, it makes for an eclectic offering. Juggling thirteen different outlets' schedules, blurbs, meeting times, etc. seems like a tall order, before one even gets into aesthetics, specialisation, etc., but Eilís insists the whole thing came together with ease. "It all came together surprisingly smoothly, obviously you are dealing with lots of different businesses, and you want everyone to feel a part of it and equally represented, so the design part was really important. The graphic designer, Pedro, did a great job tailoring each ad to fit the personality of the shop, and the overall theme of the map. The map design itself, I think, is really classy and professional. All the businesses were really positive, and into it, so that made it all quite straightforward."

Vintage is very much a sector that has established itself in Cork in recent years, with something for everyone presenting itself in the city's retail spaces. With that being said, given the nature of the economy in recent years, the shops have seen fit to build themselves up on niche trades, rather than attempt to catch the vintage craze that emerged a few years back. In that mindset, the venues have relied upon each other for support. "It's so important for small businesses to work together, we need to see each other as partners, rather than competitors. We are small fish, if we all swim together we have a chance of competing with the larger, multinational corporations that threaten small businesses. Cork has so many cool little vintage-inspired businesses, we have an opportunity to highlight that and attract consumers,

who are looking for something unique and interesting. Our businesses are completely local, all the money remains in the economy, this, in my opinion is so important to sustainable economic recovery. We are also in a unique position, as everything is pretty much a one off piece and so there really is no direct competition.”

Vintage seems to have outlived any perceived bubble or craze in Cork, at least, in terms of fashion and clothes: to what can this be attributed? “Vintage fashion is made to last, it’s a niche market, it’s not a fad. People who buy vintage don’t necessarily follow the latest fashion, they have their own unique style, it is also about nostalgia and stories, appreciation of history. For me it’s very romantic. I like to know about the life a certain object might have led before it got here, or it reminds me of my childhood, or my grandmother. Of simpler times. You can express yourself and be more creative mixing up styles from different eras.”

Closer to home for Eilís is the vinyl boom, which continues unabated. Music plays a big part of the Vintage Map by its nature, with Mother Jones’ Flea Market home to numerous record stalls, and Records & Relics stocking a panoramic range of music on pre-loved wax. Eilís discusses its importance to the traders amid a boom period for records. “Vinyl is our bread and butter. We have noticed a massive increase in sales, and a increasingly varied type of buyer. From students to grandparents! It’s great to see so many people appreciating this format. Vinyl sales have exceeded digital sales this year in the U.K, so we are happy.”

In the run-up to the holiday season, and with more people looking to get out and take care of the presents early to avoid crowds and perhaps have bigger seasonal celebrations than previous years, sales have been on the up. The collaborative strategy has been working. “Sales are increasing, slowly but surely. Nice vibes and happy heads all round!” It must seem quite odd to be asked about the future when trading in memories and tangible experiences in an increasing market for new ideas and intangibles. But Eilís responds in the positive. “There has already been lots of great collaborations, like Fable in the English Market so hopefully more of the same. It would be great if Cork got a reputation, and well known as a great place for vintage buyers to find treasure, especially when there are so many shops within easy walking distance of each other.”

Find the Cork Vintage Map online at corkvintagemap.com, or physically at participating locations around the city centre.

THE RUBBERBANDITS: HORSE SENSE

(Evening Echo, December 12, 2016)

After selling out one show and announcing a second for St. Luke's, the Rubberbandits top off a banner year with a trip to Cork. Mike McGrath-Bryan talks with Blindboy Boatclub ahead of their Leeside engagements.

It has to have been an exhausting year for Limerick comedy/performance-art duo The Rubberbandits. The duo of Blindboy Boatclub and Mr. Chrome, along with collaborators, have been at it for years, but their groundswell of support and grassroots influence has grown massively. Progressing from prank-calls and early tunes to post-austerity commentary, the Rubberbandits have made their thickly-accented voices heard, most notably the anti-materialism of 2012's *Horse Outside*, and last year's *Dad's Best Friend*, a chilling examination of male mental health issues in modern Ireland.

The Rubberbandits' *Guide* has just finished up after a four-episode run on RTÉ, that followed last year's *Rubberbandits' Guide to 1916*. A series of explainers, the show takes on overarching social and philosophical issues, from the nature of reality itself, to addressing Ireland's changing attitudes to sex. It does so while taking in the spectrum of the Bandits' self-created universe; the boys take slightly off-kilter advice from puppet odd couple Beckett and Joyce, and are witness to the ongoing self-inflicted suffering of the Trout of No Craic. But rather than an exercise in in-jokes, the Bandits cast their net out wide in balancing comedy and comment. The Irish pub/nightclub is recast as Attenborough-esque point of observation; reality stars sit befuddled as the pair test their perceptions of reality; and the early internet is characterised as a pond, replete with various dodgy activity in the reeds and pirated Metallica C.D.s floating at the surface.

The duo have dealt with RTÉ before in different capacities, but the question is, how different was it to get a show as far-reaching as *Rubberbandits' Guide to RTÉ*, getting stuff green-lit, etc.? "We had complete creative control with the show. That's the only conditions we'd work under. We know exactly what we want to do and how to do it, we rarely need outside help. At this stage, we've proven ourselves internationally enough for RTÉ to fuck off and leave us to our own devices. That's what we did."

An underrated aspect of the *Guides* has been the soundtrack – metal veterans Deftones, Nigerian synth-funk maestro William Onyeabor and vaporwave figurehead Macintosh Plus feature prominently, among others. Who managed to sneak those past RTÉ's music department? "We had full creative control. RTÉ is great for music, in fairness, they have a blanket licence on everything except The Beatles. I'm a huge music fan, obviously. I love how a piece of music can change the tone of a scene on TV. We also knew that there were no plans for a DVD release, which would have meant losing the music in favour of library tracks, so we went mad with tunes. Picked some savage stuff for it. Samuel Beckett shooting James Joyce in the head while he's listening to Deftones is what the TV license fee was made for."

Another major piece of the Bandits' year was providing ITV's comedy contest show *Almost Impossible Gameshow* with play-by-play commentary and colour analysis. Blindboy addresses the subject of any concerns from producers unaccustomed to the duo, as to their voices, senses of humour, etc., while breaching how MTV been to deal with, for the American adaptation. "The UK version was great craic, we got to be very subversive with our humour for that. The American one that's showing on MTV at the moment is a pile of sh*t, I won't even watch it. We just did it to earn a few quid. The type of thing we were going for just doesn't work with Yanks."

But more so than any professional aspect of the duo's body of work, the defining aspect of the year for the Bandits has to have been their increased visibility in Irish media, pertaining to mental health and the crisis we have at present. It's a topic that official Ireland stayed silent on for a very long time before public discourse finally necessitated that discussion. Blindboy talks about how that has changed, and the Bandits' role in that discussion, looking back on the last 12 months in particular. "We view ourselves as socially engaged artists. We view art, not just as a way to affect social change. The mental health crisis in Ireland is something that affects ourselves and all of our friends. So fuck that, if no one else was going to talk about it, then we would. None of the stuff that I say about mental health is novel or original, I'm just regurgitating what I've read from psychology books. We should be asking why our politicians aren't informed on this stuff, rather than focusing on why I am."

The other question pertaining to the topic is the now-hackneyed assertion that "the man with the bag on his face makes more sense than the man in the suit". Boatclub and Chrome have utilised the lines between comedy and commentary expertly, but what further role does Blindboy see for artistic practice in Ireland as a tool of discourse and change, given the relative lack of support from officialdom, and where does he see the discussion going? "I think, with the internet, artists don't need any support to get their stuff out there. To earn a living they might need support, but to create change, all you need is a message and the Internet."

Boatclub and Chrome have been practicing artists from a very young age, and they've changed medium with the times, turning juvenile scutting into a fully-fledged, 'dole-queue Dada' artistic school of thought. But where next for Gas C*ntism? "We haven't a clue, that's half the craic. We're both fairly handy visual artists. I can paint, and Mr. Chrome can sculpt. I'd say we might give that a lash. But there's still loads to be done with music, theatre and writing."

After selling out their first date on the 22nd of this month, the boys are playing St. Luke's for a newly-announced second show on the 21st. After the big year it's been, what can we expect from the live show this time around? "Two apes from Limerick wearing plastic bags on their heads, singing a load of songs about greyhounds, and a shower of eejits from Cork in the audience loving it." And as an arguable career year comes to a close behind them, Blindboy is to the point about what further to expect from the Rubberbandits in 2017. "I'm writing a book and we'll have a lash at a musical."

Your writer and Blindboy have spoken before about Cork, before their *Everyman* performance of musical *Continental Fistfight*, and his feelings on the city. Blindboy further considers his relationship with the real capital, through the prism of his own home city. "Cork is class, it has the feeling of Limerick about it. But

ye've a better buzz and ye have yer sh*t together. It's like watching an older brother get a mortgage, while we're still smoking rollies and combing our pubes."

As our interview time draws to a close, one question remains to be asked, and that's the plight of the Bandits' close associate (and Salmon of Knowledge relative) the Trout of No Craic. Seemingly mired in his own ever-worsening misery, he reached his nadir during the Guides series, engaging in sexist & transphobic outbursts, and letting his various urges destroy his relationships. Blindboy, with a heaving sigh, simply proffers: "He's trapped in the prison of his own negativity. The key to his escape is compassion, but he's too busy sucking boobs for that."

LANKUM: ON THE CUSP OF THE UNKNOWN

(*Village Magazine*, November 2017)

The last couple of years have been busy for Dublin folk miscreants Lankum, to say the very least. Emerging from their roots in the Dublin underground, the one-time performance-art *enfants terrible* have completed a transformation into arguably the country's foremost folk performer-curators, casting traditional gems and original compositions in a mix of folk, traditional and a variety of modern alternative idioms from drone to Krautrock. It's seen them go from putting down their first "proper" long-player in a bunker under the city, to playing the Royal Albert Hall for the BBC Folk Awards and signing with iconic indie label Rough Trade for new album 'Between the Earth and Sky'. It appears as though the band are on the cusp of wider success, but for vocalist/multi-instrumentalist Daragh Lynch, it's just the next step. "The last couple of years have been crazy, alright, from playing on Jools Holland, or in the Paris Philharmonic and Royal Albert Hall, playing on national TV in Ireland, and making friends with the likes of Christy Moore and Martin Carthy, having meetings with the heads of Rough Trade, it's all seemed like a long series of bizarre moments where we keep turning to each other and whispering, "what in the living fuck is going on?" I'm not sure we really feel like we're on the cusp of something "bigger", as such, more that we're on the cusp of the unknown, with a new album, a new record label, a new name and no idea how the next year is going to pan out. Not that that's anything bad! It brings a certain level of excitement in its own way."

Perhaps the biggest milestone, not just for the band, but regard the address of social issues among the Irish musical community in recent times, has been changing their name from 'Lynched' to 'Lankum'. A decision taken to express solidarity with marginalised peoples in the current social & political climate, the new moniker was inspired by Traveller song 'False Lankum', and according to multi-instrumentalist Ian Lynch, was a call a few years in the making. "This was something that we had been discussing amongst ourselves for a good year or two, before we made the announcement in October last year. I have to say that apart from one or two comments online, most people have been supportive of the change. I know that some promoters were worried about people not recognising the new name and subsequent slumps in ticket sales, but we seem to have gotten over that stage now, and are still doing well in that regard. It definitely seems to me that we made the right decision and we still stick by it, one-hundred percent. I think now more than ever we're seeing an alarming normalisation of right-wing ideas across the western world – it's definitely not a time to be sitting on the fence as it were." The band's socially-conscious attitude has always been a pillar of the band's compositions and selections, and for Daragh, the family name had to come second to the current state of play. "It was a very tough one alright, and it was pretty obvious to most people that the name, which had very innocently been chosen a decade and a half ago, was becoming progressively more problematic, especially as our reach began to expand outside Ireland and the UK, at the exact same time as the current rise of far right ideologies in the US and Europe."

Signing to London-based Rough Trade also represents another step forward for the band, with Geoff Travis' legendary label currently standing at the forefront of UK folk. With creative autonomy ensured by the label's independent status and historical weight, the band took it upon themselves to rise to the

occasion, according to vocalist/multi-instrumentalist Radie Peat. “I think on a psychological level knowing that the album would come out on Rough Trade gave us a slightly sharper focus. The stakes felt higher, when we released the last album we didn’t even think we would sell five hundred copies, so this was a very different undertaking.” For Ian, the retention of creative freedom was a caveat of the band’s involvement with any label, wary of the exploitation that continues in the industry’s upper reaches in the post-CD age. “From what I’ve heard read and experienced personally, Rough Trade are one of the only labels around that we would even consider working with. They have consistently been supportive of what we do, and any decisions that they have made have been through consultations with us. Geoff Travis is a legend, and if he is into what you’re doing as a band he will support you all the way. Playing the kind of music we do, not everyone outside of the folk scene ‘gets it’, so it’s great to be dealing with someone who does. Compare this to the nightmare world of 360 deals, labels taking merch and tour money off bands, major labels who tell you that they completely get what you’re doing musically, and then ask you would you consider penning a song for the Irish Team in the World Cup, and you can see why the decision was an easy one.”

‘Between the Earth and Sky’ presents a wider sonic palate than debut long-player ‘Cold Old Fire’ from the beginning, but equally as important as production and composition are the band’s selections of traditional compositions. A number of live favourites of the band make the cut this time, not the least of them rebel-song standby ‘Sergeant William Bailey’ and protest anthem ‘Peat Bog Soldiers’, written and first performed by prisoners of concentration camps in World War II. Ian outlines the process, pros and cons of such curation. “To be honest, the four of us are constantly researching, learning, and singing traditional songs. There is no shortage of really great songs, obscure or otherwise and it’s something that we’ve always been into. We’re always bringing new songs to the table and we’ve arranged and worked on at least as many as we’ve recorded. For one reason or another we have a huge backlog of stuff that we’ve either arranged and become a bit jaded with after practicing them everyday for months, or songs that we just forgot about. The upside is that when we come to picking new songs for live gigs or for a recorded we have plenty to choose from.” Adds Daragh on the topic: “These things generally have their own internal creative rhythm, so if something really leaps out then we can have the bulk of an arrangement quite quickly, though this doesn’t guarantee that we’ll use it, and we have a bunch of pieces that haven’t seen the light of day.”

From its first note, the tone of the new album is different from its predecessor: album opener ‘What Will We Do When We Have No Money?’ invests Peat’s scintillating take on the old Traveller song with a thick, monotone drone; ‘Sergeant William Bailey’ is pockmarked with military snare and brass, and original composition ‘The Granite Gaze’ features the Philip Glass-like squeezebox parts that the band’s social media teased a while back. Daragh expands on the fullness of sound that accompanies the new platter. “From the start we decided we wanted the new album to sound similar to ‘Cold Old Fire’ but definitely with a bigger, more ‘lush’ kind of sound, with a wider and more expansive and immersive low end, so there’s definitely a bit more drone involved. We definitely spent more time on that when mixing, doing all sorts of mad things like quadrupling drone tracks, putting two of them back through analogue compressors and pushing them out to the far pans, or gradually building up multiple low end drones across a track so that if you listen to it on headphones it nearly sounds like you’re being submerged. It was a lot of fun! We’re all very into different types of music, from Pink Floyd and Brian Eno, to The

Jimmy Cake, various Black Metal bands, Autechre, Neu! and so on, as well as traditional music and song. So it's probably more a case of us incorporating all of those influences into some kind of bizarre, bastard mutant music child."

'Cold Old Fire', the eponymous single of their first long-player, follows the band around: placing the Irish tradition of lament and focusing it on the Ireland of austerity and neoliberalism, it struck a chord with various audiences. 'Déanta in Éireann' and 'The Granite Gaze', the new record's pair of originals, act as natural follow-ons, the former follows off from the warm humour in the familiarity of bemoaning the state of things, while the latter looks very soberly at the human cost of austerity and the lost decade. Composer Ian discusses following up on one of their career works. "It definitely depends on the song. With 'Déanta in Éireann', I sat down and composed the song in one long go. I had originally intended to write a modern day emigration song – which is what it is – but I definitely didn't think it would take eight verses for me to get it all out of my system. I sang it around a good number of singing sessions around the country and it always seemed to go down well – I would often have elderly men and women come up to me afterwards to tell me that they really liked it and they understood that you have to use harsh language to describe harsh situations, so that was its baptism in a way. We were talking about arranging it for the band for a long time but could never come up with anything satisfactory. We tried again when we were recording the album and were really happy with how it came out, so it was a keeper." Meanwhile, 'The Granite Gaze' was a more collaborative effort, tackling the realities of post-austerity difficulty and alienation, according to Daragh. "It looks a lot more at some very dark and disturbing elements of Ireland's recent history, and the very real impact that we still feel from that today. When we sat down to work out the lyrics, we were sure that we didn't want to spell it out too obviously though, and that it would be a far more effective song if we alluded to things and used phrases that might have more than one meaning, and that this would serve to create more of a general feeling and mood than a straight up commentary. I have to say that I'm pretty happy with the job we did and hope that we can do a lot more of it!"

The next step for the four-piece is to head back to the UK to plug the new album, ahead of the usual extended promotional campaign. At this stage of the game, with the brothers Lynch in particular knocking around in different iterations for over twenty years, the lads have the touring regime down to a fine art, according to Ian. "Well, we've been heading off on so many of these tours over the last few years. At first it seemed like hard work coordinating everything, but we've done it so much that now we know exactly what everyone should be doing – we're a well-oiled machine! We now know that the day is too busy to organise to meet your friends in a city, that you're not going to get to stroll around most places that you play, that someone has to get the merch set up as soon as you get in somewhere, that someone has to organize the itinerary, that you should bring an MP3 player with loads of podcasts and audiobooks, et cetera. All obvious stuff, but you only get good at it through experience. I really look forward to heading off on these tours now. You don't have any time to relax really, but it's all geared towards doing what you love, you get to sing songs and play music with your best friends as well as meet great people every night and the best thing is you're not taking orders from anyone. It's better than tarring the road, as they say!"

'Between the Earth and Sky' is available on CD, vinyl and digital formats via Rough Trade. For more, check out lankumdublin.com, and [@lankumdublin](https://twitter.com/lankumdublin).

TOMMY TIERNAN: “THERE’S A REAL SKILL IN IT”

(Evening Echo, May 31st 2018)

Ahead of his show at the Marquee this weekend, Mike McGrath-Bryan talks with comedy legend Tommy Tiernan about the process and new challenges.

It’s strange to look at Tommy Tiernan and see an elder statesman for Irish comedy. A product of the last golden age of the genre in the country, the Navan man’s routines, delivery and at-times unhinged stage demeanour made him one of the stars of stand-up as the nineties wended their way out to the new millennium. Constant touring, television appearances, radio and a string of best-selling DVDs placed Tiernan in the mainstream, but what’s kept him there has been his innate ability to tell stories, an inborn talent for communication, functioning as well before a crowd of thousands as in the country’s intimate venues.

It’s been a career marked by a steady supply of new challenges. Channel 4’s ‘Derry Girls’ came from out of nowhere earlier this year to become a ratings hit here in Ireland, and a cult sensation across the water. Set in the last years of the Troubles, the show sees a group of teenage girls overcome the challenges, heartbreak and hilarity of growing up amid border checks and social tension. In something of a full-circle moment, Tiernan found himself cast as a cranky but doting father. He gets into the challenges and upsides of the role.

“My big thing was, I knew it would be funny in the North, knew it would be funny in the South, but would it be funny in England? Did the English have any way of finding it funny, did they have any reference points? Mainland England can laugh at stuff from Newcastle, Liverpool, but I didn’t know would they laugh at something from Derry. The other thing for me was learning how to act (laughs). Learning how to be funny on the small-screen. You think of brilliant comic performers like Bill Murray, Will Ferrell... Leonard Rossiter, the cast of ‘Dad’s Army’, Basil Fawlty. This is all very old-school, but there’s a real skill in it. Just because you can be funny on-stage, doesn’t mean you can do that on telly. And with telly, sometimes you can be left without direction. Directors are concerned with the camera, and the performance is left up to you. But (director) Mike Lennox was always on hand, which was great”

‘Derry Girls’ comes along right as a few other new comedy challengers surface on telly on either side of the water. Much has been made over here of ‘The Young Offenders’, of course, while Alison Spittle’s midlands-based kidulthood treatise ‘Nowhere Fast’ placed the much-loved podcaster and comedienne on the prime-time telly map. It’s been an exciting year for sitcom in Ireland, and though they’ve achieved success, Tiernan is reluctant to use the ‘mainstream’ tag on any of them just yet. “Quality will always out. If it’s good people will come to it. Everybody liked ‘Derry Girls’, and I think for people who like indie, left-of-centre comedy, there’s plenty of it out there but I don’t know how much of it crosses over to the mainstream. Reeves and Mortimer had a sitcom on the BBC that only shot two series, but I swear it was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen, but nobody watched it. There’s the problem of making something that is brilliant, but it doesn’t translate. I think ‘Derry Girls’ did. And you get stuff in the mainstream that indie,

left-of-centre people will have no time for. I remember Ardal O'Hanlon did 'My Hero'. Indie people mightn't have liked that, but it had a huge audience in England. It's an odd thing."

Tiernan's had his own turn in the television hotseat as of late also, with *The Tommy Tiernan Show* premiering last year on RTÉ One. An unscripted chat show, Tiernan is presented with a series of guests with whom to converse in usual talking-shop fashion. He's just not told who any of them are in advance. "I got the idea in a hotel room in the North of England. I was on tour at the time, and the following morning, I ran it by my tour manager, I said 'what do you think?', she says, 'yeah, that's good'. So, I sat on it for ages. Then I brought it to a radio producer, an old friend of mine, and the first year of it went to radio. The idea is so simple. It's one of those things. You're not offering people something convoluted."

As a journalist asking about Irish comedy on telly, you almost hate to ask anyone about 'Father Ted'. As many careers as the show made in the mid-to-late nineties, it's also cast a shadow of its own across Irish comedy over the years, as the yardstick to which all attempted comedic incursions on the mainstream are compared. Tiernan's moment on the show came as it was wrapping up its final season, with final episode 'Going to America' proving to be a poignant passing of the torch. Portraying emotionally hard-pressed young priest Fr. Kevin, his interactions with Dermot Morgan's tragicomic Fr. Ted etched themselves into the Irish lexicon. Tiernan gets into the nitty-gritty of working on the hallowed set. "It was bizarre to find myself in the sitting room of the house on Craggy Island. It'd be like finding yourself in the Rover's Return, or the bar in Cheers. A very odd experience. The scene on the bus, where I find myself getting very sad listening to Radiohead, Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews were on either side of the camera. And I say, 'this is too much, it's way over the top'. They say 'no, this is great'. You have to give me some sort of guide as to when to increase the sadness, so they're there alongside, going 'more, more, more... more'. It was very practical. It wasn't some sort of one-take wonder. 'Sadder... even sadder'."

Fast-forward to 2018, and Tiernan is touring new show 'Under the Influence', currently honing it in smaller venues around the country before going to big arenas and taking the new material international. Over the past decade or so, Tiernan's show has dealt with getting older, social changes, his family changing and the maladies of middle age. How has his creative process changed, as his perspective has? "I write a weekly article now, and that's been great for getting me to sit down and boil things down. The new show, now, I've had to sit down and write it, as opposed to coming at something with half the idea. So it's just wrestling with those two things. The old approach of doing most of it onstage, and the rigorous building of a show word-by-word".

In recent years, the tried-and-true stand-up model of touring, panels and a Christmas DVD that sustained many comedians for a long time, has given way to the likes of Netflix specials, as well as podcasts like Alison Spittle and Blindboy's. Tiernan is of course no stranger to diversifying his output for different media, including stints with RTÉ Radio and a weekly column in a certain national broadsheet, so asking his opinion on what next for the model reveals an interesting insight to how Tiernan views the whole enterprise. "It all boils down to an audience and a performer. That was the way music was until they introduced vinyl, and it became possible for musicians to earn money without leaving the house. The album sells, they get the money, they tour. But the original contract was, the performer and the audience. And in stand-up, that's the contract. Everything else... some people are attracted to podcasts, some people

are attracted to sitcoms. The only thing you can justifiably demand as a stand-up, is an audience. That's it. You're not entitled to the rest of it. Microphone. Crowd. Room. Material. That's it."

Tiernan heads back to the Marquee this weekend, as part of the docklands' annual summer offering, after a brace of small shows at West Cork music venues. He's candid about the process of scaling up material to account for the difference between Connolly's and the Marquee. "I didn't know how to play them until last year, those big rooms. You end up over-extending, and forcing it. I decided that what I wanted was to have fun, and then figured out how to have fun with 4,000 people. A fantastic experience. I'm in Connolly's of Leap (tonight) and DeBarra's of Clonakilty (tomorrow), so going from 150 people then to 4,000 on Saturday. How do I have fun, how to give people a good night out? I wouldn't like to play either venue all the time. The room totally affects the performance, but it's staying in control of the fun element that makes it enjoyable."

It's a busy time for a reluctant statesman for Irish comedy, with the next stage in the 'Derry Girls' success story just over the horizon, and the unending tour continuing apace. "I'm working on the new show until October, 'til we record the new series of 'Derry Girls'. Then hopefully the new show will be good enough to take to the bigger rooms. We'll keep going... keep talking (laughs)."

CAOIMHÍN O'RAGHALLAIGH: "IT'S ABOUT FINDING THE RIGHT SPACE"

(RTÉ Culture, September 6th 2018)

Next weekend sees Quiet Lights festival bring the best of a new generation of folk, trad and related sonic alchemy to venues around Cork city and county. At the centre of it all is multi-instrumentalist Caoimhín O'Raghallaigh, performing an intimate show at the chapel at the city's Griffith College. Mike McGrath-Bryan speaks with O'Raghallaigh about the process, new material and the nature of prominence.

The past number of years have seen a renewed interest in Irish folk and traditional music, much of which is already well-documented. Outfits like The Gloaming have played a part in fundamentally changing how the genre is perceived, both domestically and internationally, while song-collectors Lankum have shown a new generation how standards of various stripes can be overhauled with a will toward musical and conceptual progression. For Caoimhín O'Raghallaigh, a multi-instrumentalist at the centre of the Gloaming as well as This is How We Fly and other projects, the space to create and improvise is of the essence.

The coming months see O'Raghallaigh hit the road, with new material and live improvisation forming the basis of these solo shows, away from the glare of the mainstream spotlight. The creative and compositional process for this new body of work has drawn on his ability to speak multiple musical languages. "So, I've been using two main avenues for making new material: writing music in unusual fiddle tunings, and writing some code that integrates live electronics in a performance setting. The fiddle I play is the hardanger d'amore, which has a whole heap of extra strings. To get the best out of it, you really need to tune it in strange ways, so that all the strings start talking to each other and the whole fiddle starts ringing. You basically optimise it to be spectacularly beautiful in one or two keys, but not good in others. The relationship between the strings is now a bit alien, nothing is where you're used to, and so it's a great way to disorient yourself and make a familiar environment suddenly unfamiliar. I like to think that you get 'ideas for free', happy accidents from putting your fingers where you think a note is, only to find a totally different note living there."

Recording and making sense of this process is perhaps the simplest part of the creative process, as O'Raghallaigh outlines. Narrowing down the results of improvisation, and finding the next thing to do with them reveals further layers of his innate musical ability, and his desire to challenge himself. "So I'll put my fiddle in one of these tunings, press record on an iPad, and just improvise a load of rubbish, which I then sort through and pan for gold. I'll collect these nuggets of a few notes, and find the beginnings of a new piece that slowly grows into something. I write the code in a language called ChuckK, and I've designed it to be an unpredictable playing partner for improvising music in a live situation. I've built in randomness in terms of what happens, when it happens, and for how long it continues. This is a reaction to using more conventional 'loopers' in the past, where you build up layers that are locked together – I wanted something much more free and unpredictable, something where I couldn't know quite what would happen next. Seán Mac Erlaine was a big inspiration in this too – I'm a big fan of how he uses live

electronics in his solo performances, it seems so seamless and natural. I've a long way to go, but it's a very rewarding process, writing the code, using it, refining or redesigning it – it continues to evolve and grow with every show.”

With such a comprehensive creative process, with so many elements at play, the question of what exactly goes into the production of O'Raghallaigh's solo music, and at what exact point a piece of music is 'complete', is a prescient one. “I'd very happily commit it to record right now. I think all that's needed is the right space and a chunk of time. Every record is going to be a snapshot in time, what you were capable of at that particular moment in that particular place, and I think that's the beauty of it. I suppose you want enough time to elapse between records so that you've moved on from where you previously were, and I feel good about that now.”

This upcoming run of activity comes at a break in the action for The Gloaming, after two successive albums have come in for near-phenomenal critical acclaim and commercial success. When asked if he's had time over the past while to process everything that's happened with that outfit, O'Raghallaigh retains his cool discussing the events of the past few years. “The success of The Gloaming is all quite abstract for me – it's like I'm looking in from the outside, like I'm taking a trip with the Ghost of Christmas Present. The concrete thing for me is the music-making, the real-time playing, and creating something that I believe in myself. It's great that we've got such an extraordinary reaction to that band, of course. But I don't believe it's too healthy to get caught up in what other people think – you have to just believe in what you're doing yourself.

The pursuit of these processes and daily mundanities can of course differ from project to project for busy musicians, and it's no different for O'Raghallaigh when operating solo for an extended period, compared to time in collaboration with either The Gloaming or This is How We Fly. The agency that performing solo grants him, however, is what sticks. “The freedom I get from playing solo is kind of thrilling to me. I love standing on stage on my own and just jumping off the cliff, not knowing where you're going to land, what note you're going to play, whether you might just fall flat on your face, or the whole thing just takes off. It's an incredibly liberating feeling, that at any point you can go absolutely anywhere, and there's nobody expecting you to play a certain note at a certain time, nobody relying on you to stick to a plan, no plan. It's just pure freedom.”

This past summer saw O'Raghallaigh take an extended solo run of the United Kingdom during the summer, including some of the specialist festivals and gigs that have emerged over the years. The atmosphere and location of one in particular makes for a significant story. “‘Singing with the Nightingales’ is an event that singer and folksong-collector Sam Lee runs. Thirty people set off into the forest in the pitch black of night in search of a songbird, no torches, no talking, and after walking half an hour, we dove into the deep undergrowth, where a little nightingale was singing his heart out. We listened for maybe twenty minutes to this little bird belting out the most beautiful song, wholly unperturbed by our presence. And then Sam and myself took turns playing along with him, in whatever way we saw fit. Whether he changed his tune or not, I don't know, but the people there were quite sure he did. The nightingale will often add the songs of other birds to his repertoire, so perhaps it's not so farfetched. We stayed there for I don't know how long, maybe an hour, maybe three, and when we finally left, he was

still singing. Ever since, my ears have been opened, and the joy of hearing a blackbird or a thrush here in the local park has added so much to the everyday for me.”

O’Raghallaigh is on tour throughout September and October, including, as mentioned, headlining the first Quiet Lights festival in Cork next weekend. Ahead of these dates, he collects his thoughts on this significant run of dates specifically, and what went into choosing the venues along the way. “Well, I really want to make a new solo album soon, and this run of dates will be very much related to that, trying out new tunes and improvising with the electronics, trying to refine the code and the notes after each night, and moving towards committing something to tape. What attracts me to these venues is the intimacy, the acoustics, or the people running them!”

Beyond the process of further refining and road-testing new compositions, O’Raghallaigh’s schedule for the remainder of the year is typically full, with new collaborations and an excursion on the horizon, as he pursues the urge to improvise and further create. “I want to start work on a solo album, that’s a big ‘next thing’ for me. In terms of collaboration, I have two duo records that I want to bring out in the next eighteen months or so: one with Dan Trueman, a follow-up to our Laghdú album from 2014, and one with Thomas Bartlett on piano. And I can’t tell you how excited I am about a piece that Dan Trueman is writing for me and the New York contemporary music ensemble Contemporaneous. We’ll be starting work on it in April next year, over in the States, and I expect it’s going to be a big challenge and a big thrill.”

Caoimhín O’Raghallaigh is touring throughout the autumn as part of the ‘Islander Presents’ series of concerts and events. For tour details and tickets, visit www.islandermusic.net.

THE JAZZ AT 40: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

(Evening Echo: Jazz Festival Special, October 17th 2017)

It's said that history happens when no-one is looking, and this could certainly be said of the origins of the Cork Jazz Festival. Mike McGrath-Bryan takes a look at the Jazz' development, and what lies in the future for the October Bank Holiday institution.

Suffice to say, festivals in Cork were a far different kettle of fish in 1978 to the current state of play. While the city's music scene was beginning to shift shape under wider influences, and Macroom's Mountain Dew shindig had just entered its third year, the festival calendar in Cork wasn't the hectic onslaught of genre celebrations and all-dayers that the city's culture vultures are au fait with now. In fact, the city's most enduring music festival wouldn't even have happened if the Metropole Hotel on McCurtain Street hadn't been able to go through with an altogether more pedestrian booking for the State's first official October Bank Holiday. Jazz Festival co-founder Pearse Harvey explained the Jazz' roots to the then-Cork Examiner for a special supplement in 1998: "A National Bridge Congress which had been booked in to the Metropole for the last weekend in October was cancelled. Jim Mountjoy, then marketing manager at the hotel, was in a dilemma as to how he might recoup some or all of his lost business, and he contacted me with an invitation to discuss a jazz idea he had for the hotel. Over lunch Jim explained the implication of the bridge cancellation, and asked me what I thought of the idea of staging a mini-jazz festival in the hotel over the weekend, and would I help set it up."

Harvey's jazz acumen, and Mountjoy's prowess as a pitchman, helped seal the deal with the Jazz' first sponsors, tobacconists John Player, a sponsorship move that would be unimaginable in the current climate. In October of 1978, the first annual John Player Jazz International was announced, booked by a committee of members of the recently-defunct Cork Jazz Society, in a manner that might be deemed 'DIY' in modern terminology, cold-calling agents and bookers to determine talent availability and fees. Their efforts bore fruit, as Kenny Ball and his Jazzmen packed out the Opera House, while the Ronnie Scott Quintet with Irish jazz pioneer Louis Stewart, sat alongside George Chisholm, Monty Sunshine, Will Bill Davison and Betty Smith among others in the billing at the Metropole, in addition to a strong lineup of local outfits, including Leaside jazz staples Harry & Friends. Many traces of the multifaceted music event with which we are familiar today emerged can be traced back to this community endeavour: the Metropole of course played home to the Festival Club and indeed a great amount of the programme, while the festival's current Jazz Camp strand of events got its start in workshops hosted by Louis Stewart on guitar and Shaun Forde on jazz percussion, the latter becoming an impromptu jam with attendees.

Despite some hiccups in the early going, including the second installment's headliner Oscar Peterson cancelling his appearance owing to illness, and the Dutch Swing College Band ending up in Shannon owing to a flight diversion, the festival swung from strength to strength. Leading lights of the oeuvre came through town on European swings in touring to lend weight to the event in its infancy, including Art Blakey, Memphis Slim, and headlining the third installment in 1980, the immortal voice of jazz herself, Ella Fitzgerald, performing matinee and late shows amid a massive media presence and a warm civic

reception. The rundown of eighties lineups indeed read now as a 'who's who' of jazz and blues history: Sonny Rollins, Mel Torme, Buddy Rich, B.B. King, Acker Bilk, and Stephane Grappelli are but a handful of the legends who came Leaside to put their mark on a rapidly-growing civic institution.

1981 saw the John Player company pass on further sponsorship, casting doubt on the festival's development. Amid rumour and controversy that the white-hot festival would be relocated to Dublin, Guinness took the mantle, becoming main sponsor in an arrangement that continues to this day. Speaking on the matter in 1998, Mountjoy outlined his pitching process to the Dublin brewery and how the risks paid off. "I put my ideas to them on how I saw the Festival going forward – a large Pub Trail, a Jazz Boat from the U.K., a Jazz Train from Dublin, and greater domestic & overseas marketing of the event.. the results were immediate, with all types of accommodation within a 15-mile radius, and up to 35,000 visitors of all age groups attending the festival. Many of my friends (in marketing) consider the Jazz to be a classic in off-peak creative marketing."

Jennifer Gleeson, sponsorship manager at Guinness, reflects on the company's current relationship with the festival. "We've seen it grow and develop over the years, from what started out as a small gathering of people into what is now one of the most prestigious and hotly anticipated cultural events of the year. It takes a lot of effort year in, year out, and what's really brilliant is that the passion for the festival just grows year-on-year. It's definitely one of the finest examples of collaboration between ourselves and the Cork Jazz Festival committee, Cork City Council, Failte Ireland and all the publicans, hoteliers, venue owners and restaurateurs who play such a huge part in ensuring people leave the festival with such amazing memories and a longing for their return next year."

As the eighties gave way to the nineties, and the Jazz become entrenched in the Leaside gigging calendar, the likes of Chick Corea, Dave Brubeck and Dizzy Gillespie headlined the festival, solidifying their legacies as attractions in the twilights of their careers. As the new millennium dawned, the Jazz Festival Committee began the inevitable expansion to a wider audience via jazz-influenced artists, as well as taking on crowd-pleasers like Damon Albarn. Jazz Festival Committee member Fiona Collins explains the balance behind the festival's oft-scrutinised booking decisions. "It's about looking at the quality of the acts, and seeing what best suits the venues we're going to, and the type of audiences they will draw. For example, this year, we have the Miles Davis tribute on Saturday at the Everyman, and Soul II Soul at the Opera House at the same time. Both come under the broad jazz umbrella, but both are at completely different ends of the spectrum. So it's about maintaining and figuring out that balance."

With said balance in mind, the Jazz Festival has undoubtedly grown into the marquee weekend of music in the city. Case in point, the Jazz opens on Friday evening with Paddy Casey and Brian Deady, two well-travelled songwriters, in a free outdoor show, and the Festival Club is headlined by Ronnie Scott's All Stars, in association with the late jazzman's eponymous club in London, bringing the festival staple full-circle on its anniversary, also marked by an exhibition of behind-the-scenes photography from late Jazz committee chairman Bill Johnson.

Elsewhere around the city is a feast for music aficionados regardless of taste and age to get lost in, adding to the atmosphere and eclecticism of the Jazz. Says Collins of the festival's atmosphere: "For me, the

festival is Cork. You can't have one without the other. I love that over the weekend, that you get to experience parts of the city that you don't normally experience. For others, it's getting out and exploring the streets of Cork – getting out and hearing the marching bands, getting to feel the buzz. It doesn't matter what street you're standing on, you're going to feel it.”

CORK MIDSUMMER FESTIVAL: THE COLLABORATIVE MODEL

(Totally Cork, May 2018)

Since its inception, Cork Midsummer Festival has heralded the onset of summer on Cork's festival calendar, bringing with it ten days of art and performance that span multiple media and disciplines, across dozens of venues around the city. This year's lineup is arguably the strongest yet, with a mixture of community and international arts groups collaborating with the festival's producers across music and opera, dance, circus, film, spoken-word and visual art. Festival director Lorraine Maye is currently in the midst of the chaos leading into the event, and after a long day of meetings in advance of launch, discusses the process of organising in the months leading up to June. "The festival has a unique model in that it is very collaborative. So many events are run or developed in partnership with another programme partner or venue, and we work very closely with them to put together the programme every year. There are also lots of brilliant conversations with artists about projects and possibilities, locally, nationally and internationally. We liaise with our core funders, work with our event sponsors and partners, friends and patrons. As well as a dedicated team and Board, we collaborate with a huge amount of people year round to develop the festival."

This year's theatre programme is exceptionally strong, led off by the world premiere of the stage adaptation of the Louise O'Neill novel 'Asking for It', an acclaimed work that scrutinises attitudes to sexual assault in rural Ireland. The importance of a landmark story like 'Asking for It' making the transition across media on the festival's watch cannot be underestimated, says Maye. "It couldn't be more timely to have this story at the heart of the Festival. Asking for It is of course a devastating and brilliant book, which Julie Kelleher of The Everyman and Landmark Productions had the vision of bringing to the stage, in association with The Abbey Theatre. We are so proud it will receive its world premiere at the Festival. It is going to be a game-changer, this show. The book means so much to so many people and the staging of it will undoubtedly drive a vital conversation forward. Everyone should see it."

Spoken-word is very well-represented this year too, among the standouts of which are a live taping of comedian and social commentator Blindboy Boatclub's beloved podcast at Live at St. Luke's, but it's a really well-rounded programme coming at a time when spoken-word is thriving in the city. Maye is quick to give her take on the likes of poetry nights like O Bhéal and Sling Slang locally, as well as the extended spoken-word offering this year. "We have many exceptional writers and storytellers in Cork, and O Bhéal and Sling Slang provide year-round platforms for that work and those artists. Places for artists to test out new work, and for audiences to have access to that. We are working with Joe Kelly and The Good Room who put together the programme for Crosstown Drift and St. Luke's this year, including the Blindboy Podcast. We're thrilled to welcome Doireann Ní Ghriofa as our first festival artist in residence. The really brilliant thing about so many writers is that many of them are working in a cross-disciplinary space at the moment, which means such exciting possibilities for us as a multi-disciplinary Festival."

The festival's circus programme is a developing but distinct offering, including Union Black, a football-based dance piece from Far from the Norm. Circus has been another medium that has developed

in the city over the years thanks to a grassroots effort, and Maye explains how to build, over a number of years, a unique programme offering that complements the festival, but also allows a medium its own unique voice. “Ultimately, we want extraordinary artists of all artforms, and at all stages in their careers, to recognise the Festival as a place to do a particular thing, as somewhere to do something they couldn’t do at any other time of the year, and to see us as a support year-round in the development of those ideas. We’re also really interested in how we link local and national artists and organisations to others internationally. This involves a lot of conversations with artists, and arts organisations. It also involves thinking a lot about our audiences and our potential audiences. What do they want to see, when and where? What can they only see in the Festival? Union Black is a partnership between organisations in four different countries with participating artists from each. It’s the culmination of years of work and it’s going to be one of the most exciting things you will see in Cork this year.”

The family programme is wonderful this year, combining community celebration with engagement with the city’s landmarks, assisted by established practitioners like legendary DJ Donal Dineen, working to create points of access to art for kids. Capturing young imaginations is at the heart of the festival’s remit. “We have been developing our family programme for a number of years now. This year we are particularly excited to be working with Dublin Fringe Festival and Baboro International Arts Festival for Children to co-commission *Tiny Dancer: A DJ Set for Kids* with Donal Dineen. The tickets are flying. We’re expecting 15,000 people, mostly family groups, to attend the Picnic in the Park which this year, has many specially themed events to reflect the fact that this year is the 250th anniversary of modern circus. Graffiti Theatre Company are staging the premiere of Ireland’s first opera for babies and small people. Those young audience members and artists are tomorrow’s adult audiences and artists. Ask anyone passionate about the arts, and they will all be able to cite an artistic experience from their childhood that was transformative. It’s also about general well-being and providing opportunities for families to come into the city together and have a great experience at the Festival.”

This year’s festival is nearly upon us now, and Maye’s enthusiasm for the end-result of the year-long process is evident. “This is such an exciting year for the Festival. We’re taking a big leap forward, driven by the momentum of so many great artists, arts organisations and curious audiences. We’re so proud of everything in the Festival this year and I can’t wait to experience the incredible work of so many inspiring creative teams. Is it June yet?”

DRUID THEATRE: “VERY AWARE OF ITSELF”

(Evening Echo, February 12th 2018)

The Everyman Palace plays host to Druid Theatre Company’s production of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot from March 20th to 24th after US and Irish theatrical runs. Mike McGrath-Bryan speaks with cast member Marty Rea.

It’s a classic of Irish theatre and the calling card of one of the country’s greatest playwrights, transcending the French culture that informed its creation and the Irish wit that brought its subsequent English translation to life. *Waiting for Godot*, a tragicomedy in two acts penned by Samuel Beckett, pits misfortunate protagonists Vladimir and Estragon (as well as their audience) against their own circumstances, the company of others, and questions of existence. A defining work of humour, absurdity and thought, it’s since been interpreted as social commentary, writerly absurdity, and even a commentary on marriage and ennui, on its way to exalted status as one of the English language’s most important works.

Galwegian troupe Druid Theatre’s interpretation of Beckett’s seminal play premiered with a sellout run at the 2016 Galway International Arts Festival, with their performance taking an unassuming attitude toward both negotiating the challenges and accentuating the upsides in the interpretative process for such a beloved work, according to actor Marty Rea. “I think what really stood to us is that we didn’t have any big, academic approach to it. We couldn’t ever meet anyone on that level about it. There’s none of us Beckett scholars, or anything like that. We were approaching it merely as a play we wanted to do, because we would enjoy it. The fun that you can have with it kind of eclipsed any academic approach, which might have made it a very different production in the end. When people talk about a fresh approach, it might be something to do with it. We never pretended to be experts, but we know how to put a play across, between the four of us.”

The subsequent presentations of the show at Galway International Arts were far better received than anticipated, coming in for massive critical praise from national press, and demand for subsequent touring. This would, of course, boost anyone’s confidence, but for Druid, it was simply a catalyst for expanding on their work. “It was a big surprise that people enjoyed it as much as they did. We were enjoying doing it, and we’d been playing for two weeks in the Mick Lally Theatre in Galway, about a hundred-seat space. As it turned out there was much more demand to go further afield with it. It’s also great to know that people can still enjoy this play as much as they do. People come into it for the first time and they wonder, ‘god, how did he write that, what was he thinking, etc.’ It’s great to know a play has as muscular a life as *Godot* does. It gives you great faith in theatre.”

The subsequent ‘Unusual Rural’ Tour of the play found the company heading to outdoor locations around the country, recontextualising the performance experience for Glencree, Inis Meáin and the Céide Fields. Rea was taken by the experience of performing the play in locations like the aforementioned, and their

effect on their rendition of the play thereafter. “Godot is one of those plays that’s very aware of itself being in a theatre. In the play, we refer to the audience, (Beckett) had fun with that. So we lost a little of that when we went outdoors. The thing about these, especially Inis Meáin, was looking up into the sky, like the characters do for a long period of time. The weather at the time, we couldn’t tell the difference between the sea and the sky, it was just one big arch of grey. When we brought that back to the theatre, we had that experience then, of the vastness of the nothingness of that grey, and Inis Meáin was a great place to experience that.”

The following year, the ensemble’s Godot had a month-long run at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre in April, prior to heading to Charleton, North Carolina’s Spoleto Festival USA in June, playing to capacity audiences in both venues. It provided for Rea and crew an interesting case study in the contrasts between Irish and American audiences, and the frames of reference that informed their enjoyment of the experience.

“Spoleto is a very classical and opera-based festival. So, it’s a very refined affair. We thought, ‘hmm, how’s this going to work?’. We got a great response. They know it, alright, they’re aware of Beckett. But there were different laughs in different places, different responses. One that occurred to me: any references to the Bible, the two boys talking about the gospel, in America they were laughing away at those kinds of jokes. In that part of the country religion is a much bigger thing, the Christianity of it all, and it was chiming with them much quicker than it was when we were at home. (I don’t want to generalise, but) the Americans wouldn’t have the cynical same sense of humour as we do, so certain plays, there’s a change of reaction. We did Beauty Queen of Leenane the year before last, and (Irish audiences) would be roaring laughing all the way through it, we went to LA for it for six weeks, the response was much more devastated, they were affected by the huge tragedy of it all!”

Next month sees Druid’s Godot head to the Everyman Palace on MacCurtain Street, from March 20th-24th. The grand dame of Leaside auditoria has always been a home for Druid, and Rea is enthused about sharing the musings and tortures of Beckett’s Parisian misfortunates with a crowd that’s traditionally been very engaged with the theatrical process. “Well, I think I’m right in saying I’ve only ever played the Everyman in Cork. I don’t think I’ve played anywhere else. Very fond of it, there’s great new stuff, and fresh energy to the Everyman now. Cork’s always brilliant. Great audiences, great support for Druid always. And you always get a good, honest response. They pull no punches (laughs). It’s so good, though. You get great conversation with audience members in Cork. They actually engage in conversation about what they’ve seen, instead of the usual ‘wonderful, wonderful’ stuff.”

CORK CITY BALLET: EN POINTE

(Evening Echo, September 3rd, 2018)

Over the last 25 years, Cork City Ballet has gone from strength to strength, hosting international superstars and bringing the genre's classics Leaside. Ahead of the premiere of their new documentary 'Breaking Pointe' at the Opera House, Mike McGrath-Bryan speaks with director Alan Foley.

The arts are a labour of love, of this there is no doubt. Look at the city's veterans, the people that have rowed in behind their passion, and laid the foundations for future generations to build on theirs, and you see an unswerving dedication to their work, inextricably tied with the city, building their artistic and facilitative identities in its venues and spaces. These same intangibles are evident as your writer sits down upstairs in Cork Opera House for a chat with Cork City Ballet director Alan Foley, as he casually discusses corralling over twenty-five years of archive material for 'Breaking Pointe', a documentary on the troupe's development and milestones, co-produced with Frameworks Films. Premiering at the Opera House on September 11th, the documentary feature includes interviews, professional performance footage and never-before-seen audiovisual material.

For Foley, it certainly doesn't seem so long ago since he made a break with the city's musical establishment to do something new, a change borne of frustration and the need for a body to represent the city's dance community on the world stage. "I was a dancer, myself. I got to dance with the legendary Joan Denise Moriarty. I came to her when she was older, and tired, I suppose, and it used to drive me bonkers, when I asked her, 'please, may I do this, may I go to New York, or London, or Russia?', and she'd say 'no, you may not'. 'Why?'. 'You just may not.' I put up with that for so many years, I could not be dealing with it and needed to do my own thing. I was always very sure from a young age that I wanted to be in the driver's seat, so as a result, maybe out of ignorance, I did. So, I set up Cork City Ballet in 1991, and we had our first performance at the Everyman Palace in 1992, and it's just gone from there... it feels like about five minutes ago, then I look at this lifetime it's been, and I can't believe how quickly it's gone."

Foley has choreographed and produced all of the troupe's productions since its foundation, alongside a busy professional career, both as a dancer, and later on the boards of various ballet organisations around the country. One imagines the work/life balance has been a bit of a challenge to maintain. "Necessity. Bottom line. It had to be done. All the jobs, I've always done myself to save money, and the one thing I did learn from Moriarty was to never use the words 'I can't'. Don't be coming to me with excuses. If you do have a problem, come to me with it, but come to me with five solutions, and we'll pick one. So that's what I've employed, even with the young dancers I teach today... I can't stand bureaucracy, the bulls**t that goes with so much of the world today. 'Oh, you can't do this because Memorandum A, Subdivision Q, Article 13 states that the green form and the blue form have to be triplicated and duplicated, etc.' Are you serious? I want to do a ballet! That kind of thing used to, and still does, drive me to distraction. I can't

cope with it, so I avoid people like that as best I can. I surround myself with doers. Anyone that causes grief, or isn't willing to make the tea. I don't care if you're the prima ballerina or the cleaner, we're all on the same train, and it's worked!"

The City Ballet is well-known and regarded on the international stage, with dancers from all over the world coming to town for its productions, as well as to coach and hold seminars. As anyone in the arts will tell you, relationships are everything, and Foley has over the years made a virtue of building on international working agreements. "Very much of it comes from my training or upbringing. I was the youngest of eight kids, airs and graces weren't tolerated by my parents or my family. Very often, in the arts and particular in the ballet world, the elitism is there. Maybe not so much now, thankfully, but I'm one of those people that believes ballet isn't just for the privileged. Talent doesn't have an address. And I bring that ethos into every part of my working life, as well, when trying to attract sponsors or patrons, because we don't get Arts Council funding. There is a very good product, we deliver that. And if you have that you can go anywhere. You can do anything. Another thing I don't do too often is dichotomise and politicise. 'Here's the ballet, if you like it, fine, if you don't, that's fine, too.' It's a bit like Picasso, he painted, 'd'you like it or don't you?'"

The troupe's business model has increasingly included community and corporate patronage, which allows those involved to enjoy the benefits of supporting the troupe – DVDs, discounts on the door, etc. In an age of crowdfunding and collectivisation of resources, Foley is open about how this model has added to sustainability for the group. "Ballet is very expensive. The tutus that ballerinas wear can go for upwards of three grand. The pointe shoes that they wear, they can go for €100 per pair. They run through three or four pairs of them per show. That's a lot of money just to make this happen. We're very lucky over the years to have had some great sponsors, great supporters. The Irish Examiner, Evening Echo, RedFM, have all been brilliant. The Arts Council pulled all their funding in 2011, they don't approve of us as they say we're too old-fashioned. Heard that a thousand times before. Innovation is great, it has to come along, but you also have to respect the traditions. Ballet as a modern artform has been around for over 250 years, and will be there for the next 250. The Nutcracker, Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty. They're all milestones, that great dancers are judged by. This is what I'm trained to do. I don't want to bring swans in on horseback or in roller skates. I want to bring them in on pointe shoes! We've had a presence here for 25 years, we're bearing the torch of Aloys Fleischmann and Joan Denise Moriarty before us, so there's a very rich legacy, and the support we get every year is phenomenal. That's how we survive."

'Breaking Pointe' began production earlier this year, mining the troupe's extensive and meticulously-kept archive, as well as engaging dancers and staff in new interviews. While the Ballet had chronicled itself in years prior in text form, the idea occurred to Foley amid unhappiness at how the history of dance had been documented prior. "I had gone to see another documentary about Joan Denise Moriarty, and I was appalled at some of the footage that was used. It was all very well to use old footage, but there was nothing new or progressive. Nothing young people can identify with, and go 'oh my god, this is cool'. Young people see the fifties or sixties, and it means nothing to them. They can't relate. Bring it into their world and let them have a look at beautiful dancers, doing beautiful things, to their kind of music. You'll attract a new audience. And I looked at the archive we have, and I thought, 'I want to do something different', and show people what we have today. We are all only of our time. Moriarty had her time, she

did things her way. This is my time, it'll be over soon, and someone else will do it their way. You can only do what you can in your time, and make the most of that.”

While an extensive archive certainly expedited the process of production, the dig for material wasn't without its surprises, especially when dealing with external footage and its owners. “There wasn't much of a process as we have a huge archive. I knew we had it documented. I went to press clippings and marketing materials and they were all there. I had wonderful interviews with some of the dancers that we've had, big stars, from the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow, the Royal Ballet in London, the Met in New York. I knew I had all of this. And then, in the last two years, there was much more footage. Backstage interviews, interviews with the public. But once I had started exploring, I found some real hidden gems that I'd forgotten about. RTE came in and filmed me teaching with the Kirov Ballet when they were at the Point about twenty years ago, there was stuff from TV3. So, I was able to draw on all that.”

It's a tall order, really: the Opera House's capacity is about 800, all-seated, a challenge for any promoter to sell out on the local level in the current climate. For something as ostensibly niche as a historical treatise on local ballet, though, it seems an even heftier challenge, one for which the venue was only more than ready, says Foley. “The plan was to screen it in the Firkin Crane, the 250-cap theatre where we're based, and do all our classes and rehearsals. When I was speaking to the CEO of the Opera House, Eibhlín Gleeson, she said ‘no, this is your performance home, you have a great following, you sell out every year, I think you should have it here’. I thought, ‘oooh, it's very big, will we get an audience, what if we don't’, etc. And she said ‘no, we're gonna do it here, and that's it’. So I went with her gut instinct on it, and I'm pleased to say tickets are selling very well. The company and myself are used to the venue, we've been here for many years, so it makes sense that the showing is here.”

With the first twenty-five years of the group's history now comprehensively catalogued, it's time for the group to look at the future, both in the short-term and as the arts scene in the city changes alongside the city's expansion. “We have the premiere on September 11th. On Wednesday 12th, we're straight into rehearsals for the Nutcracker, which opens at the Opera House on the 8th of November. Nutcracker is always a sellout. There are plans afoot for ‘Breaking Pointe’, to bring it to Irish Arts Centre in New York for a screening, to London, to Cannes. But for now, we're just focusing on the premiere and, getting that over the line.”