

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS 2018

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Chairman, Graffiti Theatre

All engagement with the backstage life of a theatre involves buckling up for a bumpy ride, a journey with constantly evolving challenges for your mental and physical resources.

Active since 1984, the team that leads Graffiti Theatre knows all about the need to stay mentally and physically alert. They have to keep one eye constantly focused on trying to break new creative ground, another focused on keeping the business functioning, and a third eye for everything else.

As a voluntary chairman with a life elsewhere, and thus at a safe remove from the existential concerns of Graffiti, I can only applaud everyone involved with the theatre for the commitment that motivates their tireless 34 years of juggling of behalf of the communities they serve.

Graffiti's output has been constantly evolving, reflective of the changing Ireland it lives in. How much has Ireland changed since Graffiti's formation. In September 2013, the people of Ireland voted for a referendum to bring the eighth amendment into law. This year, the people are still analysing their own thinking on the subject.

Graffiti's work in inspiring young people to engage with theatre and creative writing may be apolitical, but it is constantly informed by its living environment, offering unique platforms in which young people are engaged, nurtured and inspired to harness their own creative impulses.

While the management and the board of Graffiti takes a moment to look back on 2017 and to think ahead to 2019, it is keenly aware that what is currently happening in 2018 is of critical importance to the future of the company.

Graffiti Theatre, like many other Irish theatre companies, is having to look deeply at how it funds its activities. This is partly inspired by a shift in the focus of Arts Council funding, and by the constantly evolving picture in terms of other funding opportunities from local authorities, health and educational sources.

Typically of the evolved and alert way that Graffiti has gone about its business for the past 34 years, the company is using its ongoing 2018 internal review as an opportunity for deep reflection on its full range of creative activities.

It raises the deep question that surrounds all creative activity? Theatre is increasingly being pushed by its state funders to justify itself financially, to balance its books through its booking office and via commercial partnerships.

This raises a fundamental question about the role and importance of community-based creative activity.

Does Graffiti Theatre have to ask itself if each activity must justify itself by breaking even?

What questions will Graffiti ask itself? And what consequences will the answers have for the communities it serves?

Does Graffiti stop funding and producing new theatre created in partnership with aspiring new writers in the community? Does it somehow look at activities solely in terms of cost analysis?

Does Graffiti turn off the light that flickers for young people in creative workshops, in many cases their first real engagement with an extracurricular creative environment? If Graffiti turns off that light, will anyone commit to turning it back on?

This is a year with more questions than answers. Graffiti Theatre has been here many times before. While patterns only emerge with the luxury of hindsight, the board has every faith that this theatre, inspired by its commitments to its communities and partners, will find the answers it needs and continue delivering the excellence that has sustained it for the past three decades.