



Building a stronger
performing arts
community in Ireland.

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Chair's Report

Report on January-December 2020 activities

This Report accompanies the 2020 Directors' Report and Financial Statements. Presented at the AGM, 30 September 2021.

Looking Both Ways

This is the company's eighteenth AGM and while it's only my second report as Theatre Forum's Chair, it seems like two very long years. And while this Report traditionally looks back at last year, it's impossible to ignore the pandemic that took hold in March 2020 and has impacted on all of us ever since. So, while this report includes the obvious review of 2020's strategy, financial and programme highlights, I hope to put last year's events in context and examine how they're informing the board and executive's thinking for the future.

Strategy

A strategic review started in January 2020 evolved a strategy that was adopted by the board the following September, which recalibrated our purpose as follows:

Theatre Forum is the membership organisation that highlights the needs of artists, arts workers and arts organisations to secure the resources needed for a sustainable performing arts sector.

While undoubtedly Covid-19 and attendant restrictions impacted on every artist, worker, organisation, and the sector as a whole, the company's strategy guided its response in the early days and months of the crisis to produce inclusive and accessible events relevant to a sector in disarray. This meant changing in person events to online ones, becoming a repository of information and guidance, being an open forum for artists and arts organisations as well as providing guidance and offering support in exceptional crisis conditions. In the difficult Covid-19 months of 2020, it was your in-kind support and generously shared expertise that enabled Theatre Forum to adapt so quickly to deliver events, services and disseminate information sector-wide when it was most needed.

Financial highlights

As Chair, it's reassuring to report a surplus and even more so to have reserves. The company's 2020 year end surplus of €22,720 added to the accumulated reserves of €39,469 means the company is in a good position to continue to support members through and after these crisis times. The reasons for this surplus, TWSS support, reduced overheads and lower expenditure on activities, are set out in detail on Page 5 of the 2020 Financial Statements.

Programme highlights

Zoom member meetings with ever more faces on our screens were a defining feature of 2020 lockdown months. Online activity accelerated with recordings of meetings and presentations also available on demand via Theatre Forum's website, which had more visitors last year than ever before. The necessity of switching to online events in a pandemic had some unexpected but very welcome benefits of making attendance easier, more affordable and accessible to a wider audience, all positive outcomes which suggest to us that on-line and in-person hybrid events are here to stay.

I'm also happy to report that online editions of the MAKE and Next Stage Artist Development Programmes both took place in 2020, with artists and mentors finding new ways to engage, make work and collaborate online. Theatre Forum also worked with Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture to produce and present IETM Satellite Meeting's artistic programme and Minister Martin's closing address, both online.

In the second half of 2020, Theatre Forum developed comprehensive health and safety guidelines in a process led by SLUA and contributed to by colleagues nationwide. Additional Arts Council support was made available to produce guidelines which subsequently became the reference point for other guidelines produced by the



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Department. While reopenings to the public in September and December 2020 faltered with disappointment all round, the sector prepared to reopen safely from July 2021.

Looking ahead

Today, I'm looking both ways, considering what Covid-19 might teach us about the future. Covid-19 highlighted the financial vulnerability of the arts sector as well as many of its organisations. While any epidemic or force majeure event is completely outside of everyone's experience and control, it still meant that the sector shut down immediately with the loss of nearly all earned income and is one of the last to re-open fully. Everyone had to imagine and re-imagine projects and programmes for funding applications within a context that changed constantly, accentuating short-term and uncertain funding cycles making all of us even more vulnerable to any unpredicted or adverse conditions.

This crisis deepened existing fault lines in our sector too. The precarity of artists' working lives has never been more stark. In a turbulent 2020, parity of esteem and pay emerged as a critical issue for independent artists, with a call for a more egalitarian sector, and for artists to be centrally involved in decisions about arts organisations and making work for audiences. In rebuilding the sector, previous inequities and shortcomings can be redressed, with an opportunity to rethink and build a better and fairer sector.

Undoubtedly, Covid-19 emphasized the importance of representing the interests of various stakeholders and case-making. The power of alliances was demonstrated in highlighting the importance of funding, employment, UBI, tax reliefs and supports. Having joined IBEC in April 2020, Theatre Forum will continue to avail of IBEC workplace H&S and business continuity guidance while continuing to work with the Arts Council, NCFA, ITI, AIST and the Department to rebuild a better and sustainable sector.

Some positives of online events and discussions is that they are more accessible to more people and benefit from the greater diversity of views and experiences represented. This suggests to me that Theatre Forum could usefully provide the forum where we can find common ground and shared aims.

A difficult year since the last AGM has passed all too quickly. Today, I must thank all my fellow directors but especially Marketa Dowling and Patricia McBride who retire at this AGM by rotation in accordance with the company's Constitution. As you know, their insights, hard work and generosity in shaping the organisation's strategic direction have been invaluable and I'm glad to say they will both stay involved until the end of this year.

Finally, I'd like to thank the executive team of Anna, Irma and Katie. I know that their work and commitment through a difficult 2020 provided support and space for gathering right across our community. That resilient spirit and sense of community will be vital as we look to rebuild a sustainable performing arts sector in the months and years ahead.

Handwritten signature of Julie Kelleher in black ink.

Julie Kelleher
Chair, Theatre Forum