

**THE
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FOUR
YEARS**

Ireland at Prague Quadrennial 2023

Ireland at PQ 2023
The Next Four Years
Curator Tom Creed
Ciarán Bagnall
Lian Bell
Katie Davenport
Mel Mercier
Rob Moloney
Eimer Murphy
Jack Phelan
Sinéad Wallace

The Next Four Years

Tom Creed Curator

**And so we hold each other tightly
And hold on for tomorrow, singing**
Blur, 'For Tomorrow' (1993)

If performance designers could offer new possibilities for Irish theatre after the pandemic, what shapes and sounds, spaces and acoustics, materials and formats, structures and hierarchies might they propose? What new creative and collaborative practices might emerge? What new social and artistic functions for theatre might present themselves?

The Next Four Years is a speculative retrospective of Irish performance design and scenography in the years 2023–2027, challenging the designers of today to imagine the theatre of tomorrow. We have invited eight leading Irish designers, working across costume, lighting, music, props, set, sound and video, to collaborate with us on this project and investigate new approaches to design, in response to the PQ 2023 theme of RARE—which asks “what the world and theatre could look like in the post-pandemic future” and calls on designers to “imagine, visualise and even create rare visions of the future”.

The Next Four Years comprises a film, this publication, and daily conversations that explore ideas, challenges and opportunities for the future. The film and publication are based on an extended conversation about the exhibition theme between the participating designers, as well as speculative visual and sonic glimpses of a variety of performance design practices.

Over two days in May 2023, the participating designers gathered in a warehouse in a suburban Dublin industrial estate, surrounded by the accidental archive that is the prop and furniture store of the Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre, to discuss the next four years of Irish performance design. They spoke about beginnings and inspiration, post-pandemic shifts, new forms and subjects, aesthetic and structural hierarchies, environmental urgencies and sustainable solutions, new impulses and unfinished business.



This conversation, which forms the spine of our film, was conceived and facilitated in close collaboration with Lian Bell, a set and costume designer who is equally adept at designing conversations, and shows how design thinking can move beyond the stage into new fields and formats.

In the subsequent days, we invited each designer to stage a visual or sonic proposition to be recorded—a kind of sketch in four dimensions with the stage of a Dublin theatre acting as exhibition space. These gestures act as ruptures and chapter markers in the film, interrupting and sitting alongside the filmed conversations. They provide glimpses or strains of practice and process, gathering and aftermath, creation and destruction, which resonate with the project's future thinking.

For the installation at PQ, we have brought the table, around which we spoke in Dublin, with us to Prague, so the conversation can continue.

This object from the archive becomes an active participant in daily conversations which will take place every morning and afternoon, when the public as well as representatives of other countries at PQ are invited to join the participating Irish designers and expand the conversation. The conversation also continues in this publication, which includes aspects of the film in word and image as well as associated texts that give further context. Later in the year, the project will return to Ireland as part of a National Tour, in which we will share our learning from PQ and further expand the conversation.

The Next Four Years proposes itself as a laboratory and catalyst for new directions in Irish performance design. How can an exhibition in a context like PQ aspire to be useful rather than merely representative? This approach draws on ideas of the “curatorial” rather than “curating”, as outlined by Maria Lind:

a way of linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories and discourses in physical space... an active catalyst generating twists, turns and tensions... a viral presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas... not just representing, but presenting and testing; it performs something here and now, instead of merely mapping something from there and then. It is serious about addressing the query: What do we want to add to the world and why? (Artforum, October 2009)

I am enormously grateful to all the participating designers for their generosity in entering into this process, their willingness to engage with language as a medium, and their courage in imagining visual and sonic responses to the exhibition theme that often moved beyond their usual practices. I also want to thank

the Irish Society of Performance Designers for the invitation to curate Ireland's representation at PQ, the entire exhibition team from Once Off Productions, and filmmaker Michael-David McKernan, photographer Ros Kavanagh and publication designer Niall Sweeney who have been crucial to the film and publication elements of the project.

The Next Four Years is dedicated to the memory of Monica Frawley (1954–2020), her legacy as visionary Irish performance designer and champion of the designer as lead artist, and her commitment to nurturing the designers of the future.

Tom Creed is one of Ireland's leading opera and theatre directors, with a particular focus on new plays and operas by emerging and established writers and composers. His productions have been seen at all the major Irish theatres and festivals, and internationally in over 30 cities on three continents.

His recent opera productions include the world premiere of Emma O'Halloran's *Trade* and *Mary Motorhead* at the Prototype Festival in New York and LA Opera, the world premiere of Michael Gallen's *Elsewhere* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and *Maria Stuarda*, *Griselda*, and *The Tales of Hoffmann* with Irish National Opera. His recent work in theatre includes the world premiere of Mark O'Halloran's play *Conversations After Sex* at the Dublin Theatre Festival and the Irish Arts Center in New York, for which he was nominated for Best Director at the Irish Times Irish Theatre Awards for 2021.

He was previously Festival Director of Cork Midsummer Festival, Theatre and Dance Curator of Kilkenny Arts Festival and Associate Director of Rough Magic Theatre Company. He is a member of the Expert Advisory Committee of Culture Ireland, chair of GAZE Film Festival, and a board member of Theatre Forum, and was a member of the steering committee of the National Campaign for the Arts from 2016 to 2022.

He recently completed an MFA in Art in the Contemporary World at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

tomcreed.org

Let's turn about together.

I know that conversation (with words, yes, but also with bodies, with spaces, with images) is a big part of why I first wanted to be involved in making performance.

Over time, the word *conversation* has also meant *the place where one dwells, or a way of life, or to keep company with or to turn about with* someone or something. All of these meanings vibrate with my old, old feelings about live performance. I want to dwell in these places. I have made it my way of life.

I'm interested, as an artist and arts manager, in what slowing down does to our work—practically and aesthetically. At a certain professional level in Ireland, taking the time to have creative conversations with each other seems to have become a luxury in recent years. Is it really *luxury*? Is it not basic? Radical even, also in the sense of being at the root?

How can we speak to anyone else if we don't take the time to speak amongst ourselves? The next four years will probably see me with my foot on the brake. Being the mildly irritating person who tries to insist that we move slower, that we all go for a coffee or a drink together.

I want to turn ideas over with my peers. We generate the future by talking about it.

Lian Bell





MEL MERCIER I would certainly like to see more design-led work, whatever that is, whatever form it might take over the next four years, where designers are in from the beginning, in the conceptualisation of the piece, of the research, of the exploration, of devising the piece, of coming up with the ideas. It's about designers having more of a voice in the creation of the piece from the very start, so that it's a shared vision, it's a shared idea. So we're not just waiting until we're all in the room together, during the tech, where we've all got to somehow or other be singing off the same hymn sheet, trying to create something together, but actually, that even before we get in there, we've imagined something together, that then we're trying to create. And perhaps that relates also to the question of text, and the role of the script, the role of directors—a kind of rebalancing, so that there are more opportunities for us as designers to step into a creative space and bring more of our ideas, more of ourselves into it.



SINÉAD WALLACE You mentioned sustainability, and that does require a new mode of working. There's a whole outline of how theatre can be made that way. And it's less hierarchical, because everyone has to be on board earlier, and talking sooner, and developing concepts together, so that nothing is last minute and ordered on Amazon, so that everything comes together sooner. But it means that when you get into rehearsals, everyone knows already what world they're building. And there's flexibility in it. But there's also space to source things. In the model that we work in at the moment, all the money goes into the set and the stuff. Whereas in this other model, the money goes to the people for their time. And they spend that time making things cheaper, essentially, because you can use things that already exist. It also gives people longer thinking together. And it's that thinking together that allows us to be really collaborative, that idea of play time. We give students play time, and space to fail, and space to develop ideas and conversations. Whereas we don't ever get that ourselves anymore.

JACK PHELAN I have a responsibility to make sure that what I do doesn't affect liveness. I think that's something that theatre itself should be focused on, it's what makes theatre *theatre*. And if it's under pressure from all these other forms of entertainment and media, then why run away from what makes it what it is? And it doesn't take anything to relearn that or recapture it. Or maybe there are new ways to be live, but not necessarily going high tech or with high production value pre-made images. In the next four years I'd love to see less stuff, more time, and more experimentation with collaboration and the tools of the live. I think that would be exciting. I think that you would also, crucially, have to find new audiences for stuff like that. And build and give audiences things they aren't getting through their screens or streaming services or game consoles. Theatre has everything going for it, in that sense. It seems exciting. And just stop racing towards scale and complexity, which is clearly just not working on many fronts, but just go nimble and weird. Get a bit weird as well.





CIARÁN BAGNALL My interest in the next four years is, how do we take care of people? And what can we put into action now, be that a union, or establishments or buildings? How do we open that conversation to protect our workers and protect the people who create the work? We'll have to see a bigger conversation about working hours, and pay rates, and things we consider to be beneficial for us in the long run as artists and as designers. I'm interested in how we support our artists, and, critically, how we support our freelancers in this country. Just looking after people really.

LIAN BELL Something that I'm really trying to hold on to, in the next four years, is that sense of us, as an audience, and as performers and makers, of us being in the room together. I tend to prefer smaller theatre spaces in general, because I actually feel like I'm with people. And there's the slight jeopardy of something happening live on stage where things could go wrong. We've all been in those moments where something happens, where actually it's quite dramatic, something happens, and everything has to stop. And then it picks up again, and there's this little rush in the audience of, we're all re-stepping into this together. And we all know it's absolutely ludicrous, but we're all doing it. And it's a beautiful feeling, and for me, that's hugely important, and I think will become increasingly important in a world where we're so segmented—you know, we spend more time on our own in our homes, or with our friends and family in our homes—to be in a room collectively, together, with this brilliantly ludicrous proposition of imagining together, I feel like that's just going to be more and more valuable over time.





MEL MERCIER Being on the edge is the place where I like to be, no matter in what domain it is, where I feel most comfortable, being uncomfortable on the edge in a way. And the edge is a place which overlaps with other edges, with other domains, so you're likely to meet other people around the edge, that idea of just edge-walking, hanging out on the edge. Where you may be not too comfortable in the centre. But part of the problem is that you're often not seen by the centre. So you're on the edge, but you meet other edge-walkers. And it's a place of possibility, and discovery, and uncertainty, and play, and liminality, all those things.



EIMER MURPHY There are things that occupy my mind all the time. One of them is the amount of waste. And the other is the wanton destruction of old objects for theatre. We're sitting in this warehouse surrounded by what is the material culture of the Abbey canon, essentially. And I get myself into a terrible knot trying to protect the things that I know have significance, and that I feel like should be in a museum, while also understanding that we have a very small budget, and that these things are only here to earn their keep by being used. In the next four years, I would love someone to have invented an ever-expanding warehouse, so that space wasn't going to be the thing that meant the end of something potentially valuable. And the idea that things can go in a skip, and never be seen again, and we lose things, just because of not having enough time, not being able to take enough care, not being able to identify those things, and just because we have to make space for new things. There are things in here that are genuinely artifacts, most of which I don't even know about. I just know there are things here that are worth protecting and securing, and I also know how many things, that were irreplaceable, have walked out the door and gone into a skip because somebody was here who didn't understand and threw out the wrong thing.

LIAN BELL I'm interested in the structures. I'm not interested in making shows to tell everybody how bad climate change is, I'm way more interested in us interrogating the way that we do things. All of us are at a certain stage in our careers, and we have a lot of experience, a lot of opinions, and a small amount of authority, to be able to say this is actually really important. We need to change our processes when we need to talk about that. There's a certain point where you're just like, well, I can't just not do anything.



SINÉAD WALLACE I think that's a lovely way of thinking about it, to open the space for other people to intervene, because sometimes you just need to open that door and be like, there's this other world in here, do you want to come? It's an invitation rather than, stop doing that. Because I hate the stop doing that. What we want to do is invite people to think about things differently. Because the only progress that ever has happened is from someone going, wait a second, there's another way. I lit a show in 2019, where I committed to doing an LED show, because we were in the middle of the tungsten debate, and I wanted to see if I could do it. And it was really, really satisfying to do that. But the actual thing that made the difference was that we were working in July and July is traditionally plastic-free July. And I talked about it all the time in tech. I didn't set out to make everyone feel guilty. But I talked about how difficult it was to find food that wasn't wrapped in plastic, and to make those choices. And by the end of the week, people had reusable water bottles instead of having plastic bottles. And people had bought keep cups to put their coffee in, instead of coming over with multiple coffee cups. And it made me realise that actually all we needed was the conversation, because that made much more of a difference to those twelve people on that show than me doing an LED show, because it made people think about the waste. A few months later I was on another show with one of those people, and they still had their keep cup, and they still had their water bottle, and I was like, okay, one person at a time. And those conversations made those people start somewhere. And then the next steps are easier.





ROB MOLONEY One thing I think about, being a bit younger, and maybe emerging, some of my colleagues, I think about retirement for them? And what retirement means for someone in this industry, when you're not coming into a very good pension, or you're still renting as a retired person, how do we care for people? And what does the industry do to support on that level, maybe to keep people in employment for a bit longer, or whatever that is? And I think in the opposite direction as well, of very young people coming into the industry, who are facing much more difficulty in terms of housing, this kind of stuff, how do we keep them in the industry? And how do we train them, and keep them engaged, and not have to face some of the issues we all had to face when we were starting off? So, there are both ends of that spectrum. I'm curious about what we have to offer, as a community. I don't have any answers.

LIAN BELL I've been asked by people who are students, or maybe just coming to the end of their studies, how did you get in, what was your pathway? Most of the time, well I can tell you what my pathway in was, but I don't think that pathway exists anymore. I don't think it's possible to do what I did. If you're asking me how to become whatever it is I am, you have to work it out for yourself, I'm afraid. As I'm talking about that, I'm thinking about the shape of a river. The river has changed shape since I went down it.





MEL MERCIER Leaving is often the best gift that you can give, because it leaves space for somebody else to step into. As long as you're moving for the right reasons, it's a great gift. And if you're privileged and blessed enough to be able to know where the next move is, and you can go there, and you leave the space in good enough condition, and other people want to walk in, it's just brilliant, for you and for that other person, and for the place you leave.



ROB MOLONEY Thinking outside of theatre, in general, there has been this explosion of creativity since the pandemic. And I think people are just making loads of stuff all the time. It's in clubs, it's across various genres, and art forms, and venues, across the whole country, in many countries. There is room to say, how about you come in and try it out here? I think theatre can be much more open in terms of who we collaborate with. It feels sometimes like a very closed group. I think there is lots of room for conversation and dialogue across art forms as well. There's something very exciting about that, of seeing what people are doing beyond the little boundary we have, and I think people outside are maybe freer to do some things. And I think they're freer to be political in their work as well, and to find different ways of assembling people together, who have common interests. There's a healthier ecosystem that we can reach for or strive for.

LIAN BELL I know the conversations will continue on in Prague. But I would love to think that in whatever shape or form these conversations get to continue on amongst us. Because I think it's been a very rare moment, actually, not a rare moment, a completely unique moment, to have these kinds of conversations amongst designers like this. I think it's very rich, and very nourishing, personally. So I would love to see a way of us, in a broader sense, continuing something that keeps us talking.





Ciarán Bagnall

Ciarán Bagnall is the Creative Director for Prime Cut Productions, Belfast. He trained at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff and was made a fellow of the College in 2017. He is an international award-winning lighting and set designer with over 25 years experience in theatre design.

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Luma is a filmed four hour time-lapse of a burning candle. The single lumen. The four hours representing the standard four hour call within a production week. The candle as a metaphor for the rigour of the creative process.

I'm fascinated by our perception of time, and how light can enforce, support and challenge our senses within a production. Within a standard lighting cue we use two different timings to control the speed of the lighting cue. An UP time and a DOWN time. The UP time is linked to any new lights coming up into the lighting state and the DOWN time relating to any lights going out or down within the same cue. As lighting designers we can control this relationship with infinite possibilities. The UP time of the new thought. The new idea. The DOWN time of the previous, the past. The relationship between the two. Their co-existence within one single cue.



Lian Bell works as an artist, set designer, arts manager, and artist coach. For over 25 years she has worked with some of the most significant arts organisations and contemporary performance makers in Ireland. She was Campaign Director of #WakingTheFeminists, the industry-changing grassroots campaign calling for equality for women artists in Irish theatre.

lianbell.com

Lian Bell

These tabards are from a performance that took place on a bandstand in a park. There were two audiences – the people who paid for a ticket and became the participants, and the people passing by in the park who happened to see them.

The participant audience became the scenography over the course of the performance. Elements were introduced to them gently and bit by bit until, before they knew it, they were performing; on a stage, wearing costumes, moving collectively, and singing a joyful song about their failures to a big, vibrant backing track. With big smiles.

By making performances, aren't we always failing? Trying something and it mostly not working out the way we thought. And then dismantling it all and trying something else. Isn't that the point? If we face the future with fear we'll never try anything.

Credits: *Sing Your Failures*
by Louise White Performance.
Premiered as part of Cork
Midsummer Festival 2022.
Costumes realised by
Deana Hedderman.



Katie Davenport

Katie Davenport is a set and costume designer based in Dublin. She won the Irish Times Theatre Award for Best Costume Design in 2021. Katie has created scenography for many major theatre, opera and dance companies in Ireland, including the Abbey and Gate Theatres, Irish National Opera, Landmark Productions, United Fall, Liz Roche Company, CoisCéim, Northern Ireland Opera, Theatre Lovett, Thisispopbaby and Rough Magic. She recently created the installation “Pegeen’s” — a pop up theatre café at the Abbey Theatre — and collaborated with Emma Martin on an art installation *KING|SHRINE* at Visual Centre for Contemporary Art, Carlow. She is Vice Chair of the Irish Society of Performance Designers and was Designer in Residence at the Gate Theatre in 2017. She previously represented Ireland at the Prague Quadrennial in 2019 and in Beijing NCPA at Evolving Design for Performance in 2016. In 2020 she participated in a cross-disciplinary group, Studio Interruptions, curated by Irish Museum of Modern Art and Project Arts Centre, and contributed work to the publication *Lights, Music, Exit*. She has recently archived her set and costume work in *Archive #1 [2016-2021]* and is currently in residence at the Dean Art Studios in Dublin.

katedavenportdesign.com

I think I’ve been making spaces that I was afraid of when I was younger.

Abandoned, multi-purpose spaces, cold and brutal. A fluorescent light flickers and gives up. I want to soften those edges, transform them into spaces where joy can happen. Somewhere you can find a half-forgotten mic in a pile of confetti on the carpeted floor and suddenly sing a Shania Twain song into it, and it feels right. There’s a life-size billboard print of a tropical beach over there, plastered to the wall, its edges peeling and ripped. A 70s vending machine beside it only sells cream eclairs. It’s paradise.

Aftermath relates to my investigation of inert staged spaces for performance and recurring celebratory motifs used in my scenographic work. These are common, usually perishable objects like streamers, bunting, balloons and confetti which are important props in my work, signalling or suggesting events prior to the first stage image offered to the audience. They hang in the aftermath space as memento mori.

The terrifying thought of endlessness, but the joy of wilting balloons in the corner, bobbing on moth-eaten carpet tiles, just about keeping afloat.

Katie Davenport



Mel Mercier

Mel Mercier is a multi-disciplinary, award-winning, Tony-nominated artist with an international reputation as a performer, composer and sound designer. Renowned as an innovative musician, rooted in traditional musics, he is committed to collaborating across artforms, music genres and traditions. He is director of the Irish Gamelan Orchestra, MÓNCKK new music ensemble and PULSUS, the first Irish traditional percussion ensemble. Mel was Lecturer/Professor of Music at University College Cork from 1992 to 2016, and inaugural Chair of Performing Arts at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, from 2016 to 2022.

Wearing my theatre sound designer-composer hat, there are several developments I would be happy to see achieved in the next four years – and contribute to, where appropriate and possible – including: the expansion of innovative, interdisciplinary and non-literary theatre design practice; more design-led creative projects that are originated and developed by theatre designers, either working alone or in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaborations; developments in funding and producing interests that recognise the creative potential of design disciplines and support the emergence of designers as artist-auteurs; more experimental approaches to literary (and non-literary) theatre making practices that are more inclusive, more deeply collaborative,

offer alternatives to the typical hierarchical structures, and provide more opportunities for greater artistic input from sound/music, lighting, video and set designers; more engagement by designers in the making of theatre for social change, which make artistic/creative contributions to, for example, discourses on climate change, inclusion, diversity, poverty and injustice. My short audio piece, *REFLECT*, explores some of these concerns by focusing on the expression, through language and sound, of the perspectives of theatre design artists on: the artistic autonomy of their discipline; the nature and expressive potential of other theatre design disciplines; collaboration across theatre design disciplines; theatre-making hierarchies; and artistic ambitions.



Rob Moloney

Rob Moloney is a composer and sound designer based in Dublin. He has collaborated with many independent performance artists and theatre companies in Ireland including the Abbey Theatre, Luke Murphy—Attic Projects, THEATREclub, Ballet Ireland, and Painted Bird. He studied music in University College Cork and pursued further studies in Orchestration and Advanced Mixing Techniques in Berklee. He has been nominated twice for Best Soundscape at the Irish Theatre Awards.

robmoloney.com

Disintegration is an irreversible performance for solo cello that interrogates hierarchy through brute force. The score demands the physical destruction of the instrument, thereby creating the conditions in which the work can only be achieved after the cellist commits to its performance. Upon breaking through the score's inherent tipping point, the means necessary to complete the piece are discovered live. Consequently, both score and composer become superfluous as the performer takes ownership of the music, liberating themselves from the score as they wrestle it out of a theoretical framework and forge it into reality by manipulating the instrument to destruction.

“There was, deep inside this so-called world, something that had no price. No gold could buy it, no church could sing it, no-one could understand it. It appeared in the middle of life, and it meant nothing but itself. For a while I hated it, like everybody else, then all of a sudden it filled my entire reality. I still don't understand it. What it was. Why it mattered so much, and what is the nature of the hole that is left now that it has gone. But most of all I can't understand the rage with which we would tear it apart, such hatred against a love so impossible, and so beautifully broken.”

Sean Bonney



Eimer Murphy

Eimer Murphy is the Prop Master at the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's national theatre. In 2017 she completed a Masters Degree in Material Culture Design History at the National College of Art and Design, submitting a thesis which examines anecdotal and little understood attitudes and behaviours around props, and applied material culture and behavioural psychology theories to unlock some of the reasons behind them. She also presents at academic conferences, notably for the Irish Society for Theatre Research, and at the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies conference in 2019. She is a guest lecturer at the Lir Academy in Dublin and at University College Cork, and is also the author of a chapter entitled 'Props to the Abbey Prop Man', a tribute to legendary Prop Master Stephen Molloy, which appears in the Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre.

“That which is rare is wonderful”
old Irish proverb

In *Theatre Journal's* 2012 issue, editor Ric Knowles notes that: “Theatre practice has always and inevitably dealt with stuff, in all of its messiness. It engages with the ‘thingness’ of the material world in ways that few other art practices do.” His observation that the theatre also “generates things in abundance” resonates. As Prop Master of the Abbey Theatre, I wrestle daily with an ever-expanding collection of the most wildly varying objects: from mobile phones to chandeliers and everything in between. These are the *things* of plays: objects conceived of in writers' imaginations, and materialised by successions of Prop Masters before me. Props earn their keep by appearing and reappearing on our stages, constantly being re-invented and re-used: the ultimate in recycling.

But with storage space in short supply I must ruthlessly confront each prop, weighing its individual merits under a cold list of criteria in order to decide which ones to keep. Some are significant props from important plays, others are antique items, rare and difficult to source. The concept of the Abbey stores as an “accidental archive” occupies me as I wrestle with the practicalities of housing this extraordinary, irreplaceable collection. Take the rolls of ‘Nottingham’ lace sourced for our 2012 production of *The Dead*. It had been made by Haddow, Aird and Crerar, a lacemaker in Scotland's Irvine Valley, for 150 years. In 2012 they were about to retire the machines that wove the Nottingham, and so the Abbey bought up the last run of this lace that was ever, or will ever, be made.

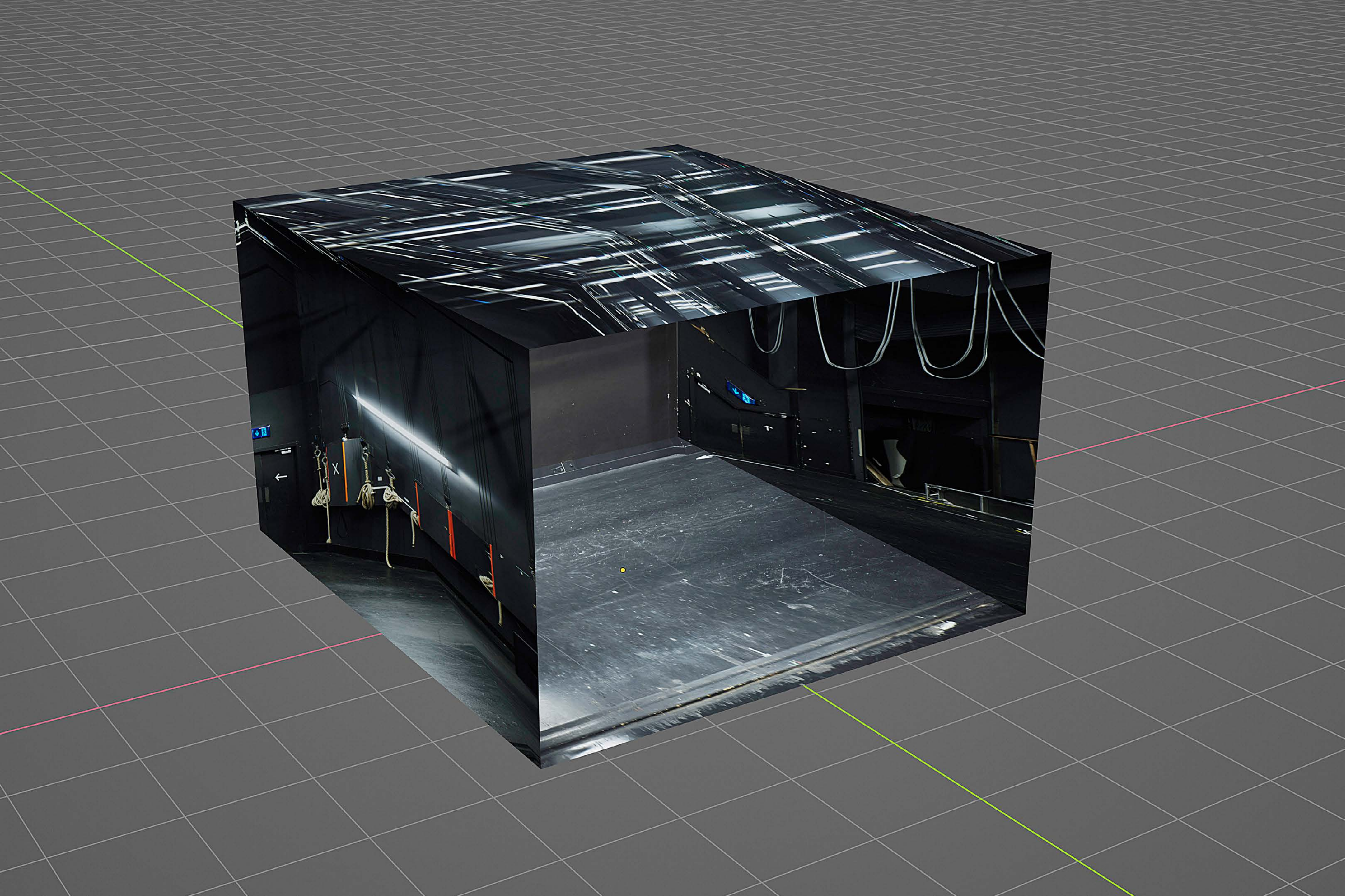


Jack Phelan

Jack Phelan is a video artist and filmmaker with many years experience producing moving images for stage, screen and beyond. His background in computer science and general ease with technology has helped him navigate/ignore the promise/threat of the singularity; and make fun stuff along the way too of course.

jackphelan.xyz

In a world where film is based on theatre and theatre on film, where theatre can be on screen and computer game become hit TV show, where something called the Metaverse can be born and die within a year, an endless feedback loop has formed—its ends tightly sealed together like an edit on a virtual Steenbeck editing machine. *This is Definitely Real* celebrates the formation of this loop by giving you a short piece of content that is part theatre, part film, part game. At forty-two percent real, fifty-nine percent virtual and one-hundred percent fun, *This is Definitely Real* will make you want to watch it over and over again.



Sinéad Wallace

Sinéad Wallace works as a lighting designer for theatre, opera and dance throughout Ireland. She received Irish Times Theatre Awards for Best Lighting three times between 2007 and 2010. Sinéad's recent lighting designs include *Tartuffe*, *iGirl* (Abbey Theatre), *The Lighthouse*, *Least Like The Other* (Irish National Opera) and *In Middletown* (Gate Theatre). She has worked extensively for the Abbey Theatre, Corn Exchange and Irish National Opera, as well as for the Gate Theatre, Liz Roche Company and The Emergency Room. Sinéad is resident Lighting Designer at the Lir Academy leading the Lighting Design module on the MFA Stage Design.

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When I think of *The Next Four Years* I struggle to see beyond our current stasis.
Our post-pandemic hope of doing things differently has faded.
The future does not look so bright.
2030 does not look so far away.
The climate is breaking down.
The house is on fire.
The theatre is on fire.
But here we are. Getting on with getting on.
Heads in the sand.

Mr Sands, our code for fire. A call to action to the staff to get the people out.
Yet still we work to get the people in. We tell the same stories of the past.
Where is the lesson for the future?

I see a change coming.
[in the optimistic moments]
I see a world willing to change.
I see the theatre of the future.

What do you love?
How will climate breakdown affect what you love?

Here is what I love.
All together.
In one room.
Sinking underwater.

The Next Four Years.
It is time to start.
To start to fix how we do what we do.
To make work better.
To make better work.
To speak about the future so it might not be so uncertain when we get there.
When we get there.



Practicalities and Dreams

The Irish Society of Performance Designers

Gemma Tipton

Theatre design is about scene-setting but not scene-stealing, it takes centre stage while creating a backdrop. Theatre designers are collegiate when it comes to production, and yet may find it a lonely role while developing their art. It makes sense to come together. The seven years of the Irish Society of Performance Designers (ISPD) have seen the Society quickly establish itself as the key representative of, and resource for, the powerful work made by designers in Ireland today.

Celebrating the work of performance designers, from emerging talent to award-winning famous names, ISPD acts as a resource hub and forum for conversation, advocates for its members, holds masterclasses, shares information, develops mentorship opportunities, and expands the understanding of this essential art. Performance design looks back through centuries of theatrical tradition, and yet it is at the forefront of embracing change. New ways of thinking and

working, fresh approaches and evolving technologies, challenge and stimulate as ideas take root and grow.

Networks

As a small country, Ireland frequently finds itself hugely advantaged by our collective communities. Networking is in our national psyche, although we may prefer to call it catching up and helping out. Once a dark drain of talent, the Diaspora extends those networks around the world, although these days Ireland's reputation speaks for itself. Meanwhile, we also have the incredible legacy of successive generations of writers to draw on and, in the Abbey Theatre, the oldest National Theatre in the world.

“It's about community,” says Catherine Fay, Chair of ISPD, setting out the agenda of the Society in making sure design in and from Ireland maintains and builds on its place in the expanding international conversation. Fellow designer, Deirdre Dwyer agrees. “Design is cross-disciplinary, and depending

on your role, you're working with directors, writers, lighting designers, sound designers, costume designers, set designers, but you rarely get to sit down with people who do your own job. Just being in a room, sharing your thoughts, worries and challenges, and discovering different methods, is incredibly valuable."

Legacies

While part of ISPD's role is to do with creating a legacy for a sector that has often been diffuse—its work, though memorable, often also ephemeral—other legacies have more recently come into play. During the pandemic, theatre designers had a pivotal role in the move to streaming, creating worlds to take people out of their socially distant situations; while those film and television projects that could remain in production did powerful work in bringing people together. However, the early days of lockdown also gave space for reassessment, shifting perspectives and perceptions of what is or is not sustainable in terms of work uncertainties and workloads.

The return to live theatre in front of audiences has made those questions even more urgent.

One positive legacy of Covid-19 came out of the Irish Government's emergency payments schemes, which gave artists and designers the experience of having a guaranteed and regular income, many for the first time in their careers. Now, thanks to strategic and dedicated lobbying from a range of arts organisations, a welcome Basic Income for the Arts scheme is being piloted. "This is part of what it means to come together," says Fay. "It's what can come out of that collectivity."

Making More

When ISPD was initiated, then as the Irish Society of Stage and Screen Designers (ISSSD), back in 2017, a fundamental belief of those involved was the idea that the more you share, the more there is. Early members included Ciarán O'Melia, Liam Doona, Alan Farquharson, Alma Kelliher, Sarah Jane Shiels, Peter Power,

Moggie Douglas, Niall Rea, Katie Davenport, Ciara Murnane, Kata Rozvadska and Eimer Murphy, as well as Fay and Dwyer. Now the membership has expanded, reaching out also to those based overseas.

Coffee Spills meetings are held to give space for what Fay describes as "mind spills", and while these initially were held in Dublin, they are spreading to cover Galway, Cork, Wexford, Sligo and Belfast. "We're planning design talks around that, as well as informal gatherings and networking." The realisation that chance encounters can spark new ideas, partnerships and projects, has allowed for many collaborative opportunities to be developed. "Zoom has been a useful tool," agrees Dwyer. "But you miss the collegial cup of coffee beforehand, and maybe the glass of wine after, the soft networking."

Advocating for More

While the benefits of getting people together can initially be intangible,

ISPD also works towards defined and necessary targets and goals. One of these is currently the development of a rate card, on the basis of a broad-ranging survey analysing rates of pay and how they break down across the different aspects of theatre design. “We’re looking for transparency when talking about money.” says Dwyer, going on to explain that while there are laudable policies about paying artists, a system of standard baseline payments would make such policies more enforceable and robust.

Another area of work is in exploring how opportunities can be created for people wanting to break into the industry, or find greater mobility within it. The era of in-house designers is largely gone, and these days almost all work is generated through word of mouth. ISPD is exploring mentorships, educational programmes, and a scheme to pilot paid roles for assistant designers across the sector, which would become a powerful tool in opening access and extending diversity within an industry that has often

relied on people being able to work, if not for free, then at least for very low rates of pay when starting out.

Looking Ahead

In the project, *The Next Four Years*, curated by Tom Creed for the Prague Quadrennial, a group of talented designers have been invited to imagine the future. Asking creative people to imagine opens doors to powerful possibilities and thought-provoking results. Similarly, ISPD has been imagining a future for performance design, its potential shaped and enhanced by supported development. Goals include international exhibitions, residencies, venue partnerships, educational links, and working towards the establishment of a National Design Centre, with shared facilities, creative play spaces, and accommodation for visiting designers.

Balancing the dreams designers realise daily out of their own creative minds with the practicalities of life in the industry, from insurance to rate cards, ISPD is at the forefront

of the move to increase respect and recognition for this vital element of theatrical production. Their own strategy for the next four years represents a comprehensive list of actions that should have far-reaching positive effects. Work is already underway, and they have the talent and capacity to do all this, and more. And, as they say in their own words: “occasionally throw a party”.

Gemma Tipton is a writer on contemporary art and culture based in Ireland.



Carys D. Coburn

In early 2022 I went to a work-in-progress of *WANDER WANDER WILD WILD* 遊遊野野 by Choy-Ping Clarke-Ng 吳彩萍. Stage right, a spill of red cloth from the ceiling that becomes a runway leading into the audience. On it, Choy-Ping sits at a desk. They're wearing red to match their backdrop, something sleeveless that shows their tattoos. Stage left a screen. On it appear settings, characters, subtitles as we hear the characters' pre-recorded voices in a variety of languages.

WWW/ 遊遊野野 takes a real-world point of departure and runs with it—the suggestion by Ivan Ko, property billionaire, that a city for 500,000 Hong Kongers be built in County Louth in Ireland. Choy-Ping imagines an unspecified future time where this has happened, with the qualification that Ivan revised his city's population down by an order of magnitude to a modest 50,000.

The action follows the inhabitants of an apartment building in this city as they get to know one another, reflect on their lives, dance to ‘Funky Town’ sung in Cantonese by Pancy Lau. A ghostly figure wearing a dress containing goldfish passes through. This is a work-in-progress, so she’s a drawing projected on a screen. But there’s a paradox here, a little like that which attends recorded sound. Amplification means you can speak very quietly into a mic and still be heard in playback—the recorded voice can be both louder and more intimate than the projected stage voice. Similarly, a drawing of a ghost is both less real and more incontrovertible. There are no infelicities of costume or performance to upstage the figure’s otherworldliness.

The credits on Choy-Ping’s website list three translators for the voices we hear: Jennifer Lau for Cantonese, Wendy Wong for Mandarin, and Maggie Tan for Hakka. Where comprehension was essential, they were subtitled. I don’t remember if the languages were distinguished in subtitles, but I don’t think they were. If you didn’t know enough to tell them apart, tough. I don’t speak any of them, but I know enough about Cantonese and Mandarin tones to listen for shibboleths while reading in English. And something about that was really absorbing.

You could compare it to the experience of listening to *Anno*—Anna Meredith’s re-composition of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*—or a Bach fugue re-orchestrated by Schoenberg. There is a baseline level of familiar meaning you can take for granted, but it’s been re-constellated into an unfamiliar shape. The cliché about subtitles is that they’re distancing, but can’t estrangement lead to deeper appraisal as easily as it can to disengagement? You become attentive to the grain of language rather than its content. Or I did anyway.

It’s important to specify *where comprehension was essential*. Choy-Ping’s work often plays with opacity. Just when you are relaxing into the rhythm of hearing and reading, listening to the rises and falls of a language you don’t speak and navigating them with a guide-rail of subtitles, the subtitles disappear. You’re left with naked language, that you may or may not understand depending on your linguistic competencies. It’s confronting but not unconsidered. I think their dual practice as a writer/designer is bound up with this kind of boldness. Because words are not their exclusive *métier*, they are less romantic about them, less inclined to get defensive about their supposed power to shape the world like nothing else. Legibility is guaranteed where necessary, but it’s not a virtue to the exclusion of all others.

Carys D. Coburn is a playwright and theatre-maker, whose work balances character and concept, feelings and footnotes.

Choy-Ping is very skilled in showing us language as object rather than tool, one stage-phenomenon evolving over time amongst many.

Unfinished as it is, I love this show already. More than that: I think it is an unforgivable failure of courage and imagination that no Irish theatre or company has produced it yet. And I can unpack it for you: formally, thematically, politically, there is very little work being made in Ireland that dares as much as Choy-Ping's.

The most generous I can be to the people with the money is that what I loved about it is, I suspect, precisely what scared them off. The piece was spare. It moved fast. If you didn't come in knowing why there were protests in Hong Kong throughout 2019-2020, the piece wasn't going to tell you. And yet, it spoke to me, which is not to say I understood it. I have Chinese ancestry but my mother's an adoptee, so I don't even know what specific heritage language I haven't learned to speak. I cannot say that I encounter Choy-Ping's work with a thrill of recognition and connection. I do encounter it with excitement, joy, respect, pleasurable discombobulation. I do see in it someone picking the same political fights I'm picking, for similar but far from identical reasons.

A final thought on Ping's use of language as object rather than tool. An object doesn't demand that we discuss it in the same way as a paragraph of argument does. It only asks that we encounter it. Its meaning is as much affective, sensory, bodily, as it is discursive, and it is those things before it calls up language in us. The impact it has on us is what drives our search for the right words for it. Which, broadly, is what I think all the best design work does — when it's allowed to.

Ireland at PQ 2023 The Next Four Years

Participating Designers:

Ciarán Bagnall
Lian Bell
Katie Davenport
Mel Mercier
Rob Moloney
Eimer Murphy
Jack Phelan
Sinéad Wallace

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The Irish Society of Performance Designers (ISPD)

is the representative body of scenographers in Ireland, a professional organisation run by designers for designers. The society celebrates, showcases, promotes, and supports Ireland’s scenographers at all stages of their careers by acting as an advocating entity, a national and international networking hub, and a resource hub. As an advocating entity, ISPD fosters designers’ visibility as vital key players in the theatre and arts ecosystem, while championing diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility. ISPD is a member of Design & Crafts Council Ireland.

ispd.ie

Once Off Productions is an independent producing platform established in 2004 by Maura O’Keeffe to provide creative and flexible producing supports for independent performing artists. Currently funded under a Creative Production Services pilot scheme by the Arts Council of Ireland, Once Off is led by a small team of experienced cultural sector professionals. Once Off enables some of the most brilliant and exciting artists based in Ireland today to develop, create and present new work for us all.

onceoffproductions.com

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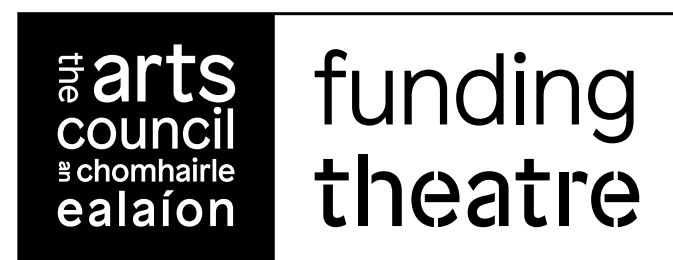
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