

MidlandsArts

and Culture Magazine

VISUAL ARTS
MUSIC, DANCE
THEATRE, FILM
THE WRITTEN WORD

ISSUE
31

A REVIEW OF THE
ARTS IN LAOIS,
LONGFORD,
OFFALY AND
WESTMEATH
SUMMER 2019



FREE

MidlandsArts andCultureMagazine

A Word from the Editor



As we go to press, there is huge excitement about the midlands' own Shane Lowry's Open Championship triumph in Portrush and the selection of Adare as the Ryder Cup venue for 2026. The contribution of sporting events to the economy has always been valued.

However, what is less appreciated is the contribution to economic growth and job creation of the cultural and creative sectors. As well as providing a sense of identity and social cohesion, there is also real economic impact. The arts sector is a direct employer and also creates indirect employment in hotels and restaurants by attracting visitors to areas. Midlands' arts activity has also attracted tourists to the region.

Yet securing funding for the building and running of facilities continues to be a struggle. While it is great that Tullamore Arts Centre has finally got the go-ahead, 20 years in the making is a long time.

As Ann Lawlor argues in her opinion piece on page nine, arts centres can create jobs and produce tax revenue, stimulate business activity, attract tourism revenue and contribute to a unique county centric innovative and robust creative and entertainment centre.

As Dunamais Arts Centre in Portlaoise celebrates its 20th anniversary, centre director, Michelle de Forge, admits that rising costs in all areas mean they must rely on the support of local community fundraising as well as funding from the Arts Council and Laois County Council.

There is now a huge amount of new arts initiatives getting off the ground in Westmeath and Longford as well as Laois and Offaly. Athlone, with the Luan Gallery and artists' studios, is experiencing a tourism uplift. Longford recently opened its Engage permanent artists' studio space. The rural Laois village of Ballinakill is aiming to inject new life into the area with the inaugural Twin Trees Festival. Meanwhile, the longrunning Birr Vintage Week and Lough Boora Sculpture Park draw huge crowds.

While much arts activity is organised on a voluntary basis, the need for artists to be paid for their work and for greater funding of regional arts is clear. It's time to bring our 'A' game to the arts.

Caroline Allen *Guest Editor*

Cover image by Andy Mason, supplied by Laois arts office.



Summer Science in Mullingar library

Westmeath library was full to the brim recently with eager young scientists who were joined by renowned experimental physicist Declan Holmes of Science Ireland. Declan hosted three workshops in Mullingar library on July 17. His unique show explored everything from the science of rockets to vuvuzelas to Darth Vader's voice.

The workshops thrilled the children and their parents. Participants got to perform experiments of their own, from launching air rockets to musical instruments. Westmeath libraries expressed the hope that this will help foster a love of learning, particularly about science and the world around us.

Westmeath libraries works with Midlands Science promoting science, technology, engineering, and maths literacy across the county.

This is one of a number of creative STEAM events Westmeath libraries are hosting as part of the 'Summer Stars' programme and 'Discover STEAM at your library' programme. Upcoming events include: Lego workshops; author visits; a visit from Dogs Trust, as well as story times. Follow them on Facebook or Twitter or see: www.westmeathcoco.ie/library

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(Image: Andy Mason)

PORTARLINGTON GOES 'INTO THE WEST'

Portarlington's old cinema in The Square, the location for the much loved family movie 'Into The West,' was decorated with a mural depicting the film as part of Cruinniú na nÓg festivities which took place in Laois on June 15. The mural was created by Adam and Darren Ward.

Two screenings of 'Into The West' took place in the adjoining Church of Ireland hall, with hundreds enjoying the spectacle. The local youth club ran a sweet shop and helped with the set up. Many volunteers assisted with all aspects, making it a very successful day.

Representing Laois County Council was Cllr. Tom Mulhall and the event was presided over by Muireann Ní Chonaill, arts officer and Laois Creative Ireland coordinator. Guest of honour was Ruaidhrí Conroy who played Tito – Tayto – the older brother in the film.

Sadie Ainsworth who played the cleaner in the film, launched the mural. There was a magical appearance of the beautiful white horse, Tír na nÓg, ridden by Tayto and Ossie.

Other Cruinniú na nÓg events took place in the

county, as part of the Creative Ireland-funded initiative. Heritage House Abbeyleix hosted activities including papercraft; quilting with artist Pat Byrne and chocolate lollipop making with Catherine O'Callaghan from Mountmellick's Cocoa Couture. Added to the mix was shield painting with Abbeyleix's resident Viking, Richard Reid as well as Angelina's Art Ventures mobile screen printing station and local musician Ray O'Sullivan's instrument clinic and mini concerts added to the atmosphere.

Vicarstown came alive with 'Vikings in the Village' at the old school, organised jointly by the integration service in Laois Partnership Company and Vicarstown Youth Club. Children from the Montague Hotel joined local children for workshops in Viking shields, weapons making and hair braiding and dressed up in costumes before

entering the tents in the 'Viking Village' where they sang Viking themed songs and listened to Viking stories. They revelled in a picnic outdoors and a circus skills workshop.

At Dunamais Arts Centre a 'try an Instrument' workshop was hosted by Music Generation Laois and Laois School of Music. A large crowd of young people got to chat to the music teachers and try out instruments in the theatre space while upstairs, children enjoyed puppetry with Julie Rose McCormick. She also gave a puppet workshop in Laois libraries.

Mountrath Development Association and Mountrath Youth Theatre hosted a creative day for young people, allowing them to experience new skills such as wood carving; slate etching and basket weaving.

Tullamore Community Arts Centre gets go-ahead

'A major addition to social and cultural life'

The board of Tullamore Community Art Centre Limited was recently given the go-ahead from the elected members of Offaly County Council to pursue the long-awaited arts centre and begin the construction phase. Following on from a full discussion by Council members a presentation by the members of the Tullamore Community Arts Centre Board was positively received and the board reported that it is able to move forward.

Tullamore Community Arts Centre Ltd was established in 2009 as a partnership between Offaly County Council and the townspeople of Tullamore. A number of rollercoaster years saw the premises on the High Street, formerly occupied by Kilroy's department store, secured for the development.

The design of an arts centre comprising a 220-seat theatre, a dedicated gallery, together with

meeting and performance rooms along with a bar was also finalised. Funding from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht of €2million has been ring-fenced for the project and further funding from the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government, under the Urban Regeneration Scheme, has also been secured.

The board has committed to raising an additional



€500,000 and has engaged the services of a professional fundraiser to achieve this through engagement with corporate and business sources.

Chairman of the board of directors Desmond Doyle said the new arts centre would be 'a major addition to the social and cultural life of Tullamore and Offaly for all ages'.

The board of Tullamore Community Arts Centre expressed thanks to all the members of Offaly County Council and to the Chief Executive, Anna-Marie Delaney, for enabling 'a great step forward.'



Longford artists' studios 'Valuable Asset'

Longford art group 'Engage' has new permanent studio space at Garvey's Yard, Longford town, providing an opportunity for local artists to live, work and develop their practice in the area.

"The arts are a well recognised valuable asset in community development and access to the arts enhances lives, landscapes, wellbeing and outlook," said Rosie O'Hara, a member of 'Engage' Longford.

"Through a series of exhibitions and events at the former providers' shop and involvement in the development and programming of Cruthú Arts Festival, 'Engage' has succeeded in developing a fresh appetite and expanded audience for the arts, crossing all sectors, both familiar with and new to arts of all forms," she said.

"While the gallery element now forms part of the blueprint for the proposed new digital, innovation and creative hub at the site, the absence of artists' workspace or studios had become more apparent and is a need which 'Engage' seeks to address with this new Garvey's Yard development."

Vibrancy

Up to eight studios will facilitate a broad mix of artists and will be a valuable asset to local arts infrastructure, adding to the growing creative vibrancy of Longford.

The studios present possibilities for networking and collaborative projects with existing and new communities, local schools and groups.

'Engage Longford' hope that the studios will also assist with the regeneration of the site and help to reverse the poor reputation that has blighted the area for some time.

The project hopes to foster artistic practice while harnessing socially inclusive community action in an integrated approach to urban regeneration.

Studio applications will be evaluated by a panel and studio rental will be offered to those who best meet the criteria, ethos and values of Creative

Ireland Longford and 'Engage' while offering a broad mix of art practices to the project.

In tandem with the development of 'Engage', members also established the now annual Cruthú Arts Festival which takes place in July. A multidisciplinary event which utilises available vacant shop units as temporary galleries during the festival, it further develops the profile of visual arts and artists in the town and county.

'Engage' is currently supported and funded by Longford county arts office; Creative Ireland Longford; voluntary contributions and local business patrons. Rosie thanked Creative Ireland Longford and the Local Community Development Committee for their financial support and help to ensure that the permanent studio space dreams became a reality.

For more information, see the 'Engage' Longford Facebook page.

Athlone poetry launch hears praise for 'word farming'

The Athlone launch of 'The Wounded Stork', the debut collection of Athlone poet Jackie Gorman took place recently. Published by the UK's Onslaught Press, it was launched at Listowel Writers' Week by poet Thomas McCarthy.

Performing the Athlone launch, poet Noel Monahan said that there are few emerging poets in Ireland today that have the same dedication and commitment to the art form of writing poetry as Jackie. "She is serious about poetry and its craft," he said.

In reading the collection, he said he was struck by the play in many poems with language. "You know you are in the company of an intelligent poet when you hear and see the poet deal with language; what I love to call word farming."

Gearoid O'Brien, MC, remarked that it was a particular pleasure to be involved with an event for "one of our own."

Jackie has previously won awards at Listowel Writers' Week and Phizzfest as well as a golden pen award. She has been commended in the

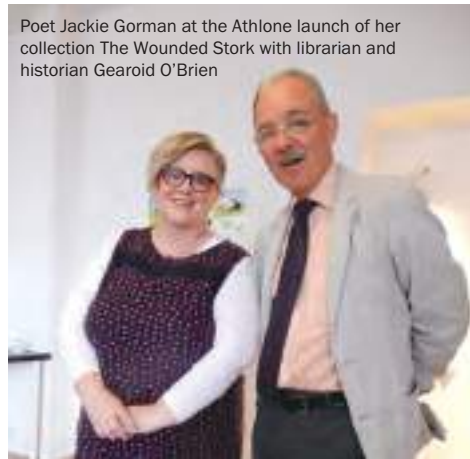
Patrick Kavanagh awards and the Irish Poem of the Year at the Bord Gais Energy Irish Book Awards. She has been published in Poetry Ireland Review; The Honest Ulsterman and the Lonely Crowd. She was part of the 2017 Poetry Ireland Introductions Series, a national programme to profile and support emerging poets in Ireland.

In the coming months Jackie will be undertaking reading events such as at The Edge in Cavan; Bray Literary Festival and Dromineer Literary Festival. She will also return to her secondary school, Our Lady's Bower, to give a workshop.

Jackie received support from Westmeath arts office last year for a residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, which assisted her in completing this collection. The Wounded Stork' can be purchased online from The Onslaught Press or locally at The Bastion Gallery, Athlone.



Jackie with her grand nephew, Nathan Nally Henson.



Poet Jackie Gorman at the Athlone launch of her collection The Wounded Stork with librarian and historian Gearoid O'Brien



BRUTE

OFFALY SHORT FILM PROBES THE DARK WORLD OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

'Brute' – a short film funded by Offaly County Council – was premiered at Galway Film Fleadh 2019, with a plan for further screenings at national and international festivals.

"Our short film 'Brute' – formerly called 'Red Rag' – has certainly been a bit of a beast to drag into existence but we firmly believe it was worth it," said producer Brian Deane of TW Films.

"The project has been in the works for a while now and without Brian Folan our writer and director's dedication and drive and the incredible support from Clare Dunne and Mary Brady from FilmOffaly, it would still be just a pipe dream," Brian said.

"Our pitch has always been that we were making Steven Spielberg's 'Jaws' but in a field at night with a bull rather than with a shark, which makes it sound more like an expensive Hollywood blockbuster than a short film project funded by Offaly County Council," Brian quipped.

"I think the fact that FilmOffaly chose our film all those months ago shows it shares the same ambition, excitement and passion to tell an exciting and important story with loads of heart and a strong social message as we do as filmmakers," he said.

"'Brute' began as a notion in our writer/director Brian Folan's head in Poland and while he had his doubts about what could be done with the time and monetary limits of a short film, he didn't let that curb his creativity. He put together a powerful story about tackling violence, adversity and abuse."

The main character is a young mother, Ruth, who finds herself and her young son Ben trapped in a physically abusive home. After taking the

brave step of fleeing their house, the two find themselves stuck in their little car in a field with a homicidal bull.

"The story allowed us as filmmakers a great opportunity to explore important themes while using a dangerous bull as a metaphor for domestic violence and how standing up to violence will always feel like an impossible task until you do," Brian said.

Our pitch has always been that we were making Steven Spielberg's 'Jaws' but in a field at night with a bull rather than with a shark.

"One of the first things myself and Hazel Cullen, my producing partner in crime, did was emotionally blackmail the very talented and experienced Eoin Naughton to work with us on locations. Eoin has worked at the highest level as a producer, location scout and location manager in the Irish film industry.

"As a Tullamore native, he was invaluable in helping us find key locations in Offaly, including everything from the perfect house, stretch of road and field," he said.

"We couldn't have made this film without the wonderful support of our cast and crew. We had a mixture of locals and more established professionals who all went above and beyond

through a number of long nights, dealing with sleep deprivation, giddiness and freezing October nights," the producer said.

"To make such an ambitious film in such a short amount of time we were going to need to plan every element of the shoot to the smallest degree. We were incredibly lucky to have such a talented creative team led by Brian Folan and our director of photography, Philip Blake, who both worked tirelessly to streamline and plan our complex shoot so we could cover all the action in just a handful of days."

All that, Brian said, would have been in vain without their most important element for making a short film about a killer bull, the bull himself. "Our bull was created by the ridiculously talented Craig Starky from the Lir Academy and was lovingly built with working legs, eyes and breath, which brought our story to life and of course made our proposed 'Jaws' style possible," he said.

"In the end we have made a ludicrously ambitious film that we are intensely proud of and are excited to send it out into the world, not just to share a powerful story about finding one's inner strength and facing up to one's demons but also a genre thriller that showcases the best of Irish talent in front of and behind the camera. It was all made possible with the support and backing by the people of Offaly," said Brian.

'Brute' stars Elva Trill, Senan Jennings, Ally Ni Chiarain, Peter McCoy and Seamus O'Rourke.

‘It’s a bit like Alice has fallen through the looking glass’

Ballickmoyler-born curator on her return to IMMA



Noted international curator Annie Fletcher who recently took over as director of IMMA (the Irish Museum of Modern Art) grew up in Ballickmoyler, between Laois and Carlow.

Annie, who has extensive leadership experience in the contemporary arts, recalls a strong creative streak on her dad’s side of the family. “My uncle, Frank Fletcher, was a painter and his sister, my aunt Mary Hillman, was an incredibly talented make-up artist who worked on many big films like ‘Bugsy Malone’ and ‘Out of Africa.’

“At one point she was head of make up in the old Granada TV in London and in recent years, before she retired, she worked on TV dramas like ‘Spooks.’ Both grandmothers loved fashion so I feel like there was always an element of fun around creativity,” recalled Annie.

“My mum is one of my biggest influences and while not particularly artistic, I find her mind and her enthusiasm endlessly creative,” she said.

After attending St Leo’s College, Carlow, Annie studied psychology in Trinity College Dublin but changed to art and art history.

Ambitious Art Space

“What was so amazing was that as a student of art history you got a chance to apply to work at Trinity’s contemporary art gallery, the Douglas Hyde.

“IMMA only opened in 1991 but the Douglas Hyde Gallery has been producing incredibly powerful and original exhibitions with Willie Doherty; Dorothy Cross; Alice Maher; Marlene Dumas; Christian Boltanski and Jimmie Durham, the selection when I was there,” said Annie.

“The gallery was under the directorship of John Hutchinson and was world class. “It seemed so

dynamic and weird and exciting, being language beyond what we knew. I worked on the education team so got a chance to really delve deep into these practices and often meet many of these exceptional artists.”

She stayed on at the Douglas Hyde Gallery after college, as a curatorial assistant. “I left for a year to do a curatorial training programme and returned where the director generously gave me the chance to curate. After another year, the pull of mainland Europe and the excitement of the developments around curating contemporary art proved too strong,” Annie said.

“In the mid-‘90s Europe was expanding. We were excited about curating art in public spaces and using art to explore the new global realities of Europe as it was changing. Housing was accessible and rent was controlled so I was pretty much able to follow my passion while earning very little money for a long time.”

Stellar Reputation

“I lived in Amsterdam for 12 years and then moved to Eindhoven for a further 11 years where I worked as chief curator for the Van Abbe museum which has its own stellar reputation for experimental museum practice.”

So how does she feel about being back at IMMA? “It’s a bit like Alice has fallen through the looking glass. I honestly find it’s rather wondrous: politically intriguing; amazing staff; grounds to die for; and all kinds of potential so let’s see.

“A big priority is to be much more adventurous in how we work and talk about the collection because this is basically our collective memory.

We need to start experimenting and have some fun with that.

“Secondly, through our residency programme, we want to create a much more vigorous exchange programme between Irish artists and other voices around the world. We need to expand the imagination about what Irish art has in common with artists from China, Africa or Latin America. Right now we are a bit too Anglo and white in our exchanges. There is a whole world out here.”

Art House Invitation

With a hectic schedule, she has little time to return to Ballickmoyler. “My parents moved to Tipperary after I went to college so coming from the Netherlands, I tended to go there when visiting. Our beautiful home growing up in Ballickmoyler looms so large in my imagination, I am not sure it wouldn’t break my heart a little to go back there. But you never know, I already have received an invitation to Laois Arthouse, Stradbally.”

The Regions

Annie is happy about the development of arts in the regions. “That has been one of the biggest developments and exacting growths I have noticed and am honestly delighted to see and support,” she said.

“My joke with myself in the Netherlands is that I have always worked in the provinces even when I lived in Amsterdam. While I was invited to work in Rotterdam or Berlin or wherever, most of the innovative practice I was able to develop was in highly energised smaller centres so I really believe in continuing that.”

Westmeath students win top prizes in Texaco art competition

Seven Westmeath students have won top prizes in this year’s 61st Texaco children’s art competition.

In the 12-13 years age category, first prize of €350 went to 13-years old Nicole Forster, a pupil at Wilson’s Hospital Secondary School, Multyfarnham, for her portrait entry.

Other winners from Westmeath, all of whom will receive a special merit award, were: Sadhbh Beirne (17) and Roisín

Grennan (13), both from Our Lady’s Bower, Athlone; Kelly Dalton (17) and Gearóid Farrell (15), both from Mercy Secondary School, Kilbeggan; Louis Thomas (10) from St. Oliver Plunkett Boy’s National School, Moate; and Sequana O’Brien (8), from Scoil An Clochair, Kilbeggan.



Nicole Forster, first prize in the 12-13 age category



Sensory friendly theatre goes down a treat

By Jessica Thompson

Sensory friendly theatre is certainly not a new concept, but it is one that's not yet facilitated widely.

Theatre can be a challenging experience for children on the autism spectrum but sensory friendly performances are a more inclusive form of art, geared specifically towards children with special needs.

With Longford's Backstage Theatre working towards a more inclusive programme, staging a sensory friendly version of the pantomime, 'The Lost Princesses', was an important step towards the ultimate goal of making theatre for everyone.

The 'Lost Princesses' is quite possibly Backstage Youth Theatre's most popular pantomime to date and it returned to the Longford stage on March 2, for a unique performance.

Quiet Panto

The ball started rolling on when a parent contacted the Backstage Youth Theatre Facebook page and asked if there was a "quiet panto for children with additional needs."

It was just a query, not a request, but it set a whole thought process in motion. The group approached the Backstage Theatre which was very enthusiastic as this was something it had wanted to do for a long time.

Together, Backstage Youth Theatre and parents worked closely with an occupational therapist and general manager of the Backstage Theatre

Mona Considine, to produce an adapted version of the sell-out pantomime for a very special group of children.

The occupational therapist met with the cast and crew of the panto to give insight into how they could work towards a sensory friendly version of the panto. Theatre staff prepared an information pack for parents and opened their doors to invite parents and children to familiarise themselves with the space.

A quiet room was set up and the studio was decorated with lights and toys, with plenty of open space so the children could run around and play. The auditorium was made more comfortable for its VIP audience, with lights left on throughout the performance and the promise that children could leave at any time and return when they felt like it.

"I think the most important part was that they could come back in, that they didn't have to leave the theatre just because the child was upset or maybe was a bit challenging in their behaviour," Mona Considine remarked.

Educated

"There's just more understanding there from us as staff, because we're a little bit more educated about it, and from their fellow audience as well and the performers. The youth theatre is fantastic.

It really bought into it well and re-rehearsed and changed it up entirely to suit that audience and did a great job."

The performance catered for a maximum of 100 to ensure children wouldn't feel overwhelmed. "We had such a nice response from parents. They appreciated it so much and it was so lovely to see them enjoying themselves," said Mona, adding that more shows like it will be in the pipeline.

"It would be nice to do something sensory, a performance that's actually designed especially for them. What we did was the theatre members adapted the performance to suit the audience and they did a brilliant job. But we could probably do something that will really appeal to them."

Mona hopes to work with Backstage Theatre's artist-in-residence, Maisie Lee, as well as Aisling Children's Festival to ensure that more inclusive performances are provided.

"You just want them to have access to something every other child has access to so it would be nice to design something with that in mind but also to try and make all of our programme more accessible," she said.

Backstage Youth Theatre is also eager to learn from this experience and hope to make the relaxed panto an annual event.

2020 vision: Fleadh Cheoil to return to Mullingar

Westmeath County Council has expressed delight that Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann has chosen Mullingar as the venue for Fleadh Cheoil 2020. It will run from August 2 to 9 next year.

Chief executive Pat Gallagher congratulated the hard working committee on its success and pledged that the Council will continue to support the organising team with all necessary resources to make the Fleadh a success.

Mullingar Municipal District Mayor Bill Collentine congratulated the Mullingar Comhaltas committee in bringing the Fleadh Cheoil back home. Comhaltas was founded in Mullingar in 1951 and the first ever Fleadh Cheoil was held in Mullingar that year.

Mullingar, he said, is a strong and vibrant visitor destination with excellent restaurants; accommodation; amenities and high quality transport links which will deliver a traditional Fleadh in 2020 to a superior standard.

Cathaoirleach of Westmeath County Council, John Dolan, said the elected members are fully committed to supporting the Fleadh in 2020 and beyond. He said this is a great opportunity for Mullingar, the county and the wider region to showcase what the midlands has to offer as a visitor destination.





Dunamais Arts Centre celebrates 20th anniversary

When the idea of an arts centre for Portlaoise was first mooted locally over two decades ago, there was an enthusiastic response, with everyone from prison officers to local businesses pitching in pounds and pence to help get the Dunamais Arts Centre up and running.

The excitement was palpable as locals saw their local library relocate and a state-of-the-arts centre replace it in the redeveloped building adjoining the courthouse, breathing new life into the town.

“Dunamais was developed as part of a wave of regional arts investment, under then Minister for Arts, Michael D. Higgins, and provided top class facilities previously only found in city locations,” said centre director, Michelle de Forge, who took over from the first director, Louise Donlan, in December 2012.

“This new infrastructure allowed for more widespread professional touring theatre, music and dance by Irish and international companies, bringing their work directly to regional audiences. And of course, the incredibly talented local performing and visual artists have been central to programming every season since the centre opened too, on our stage, screen and gallery walls,” Michelle said.

Dunamais’s 240-seat auditorium and cinema; art gallery; workshop spaces and café which is this year celebrating its 20th anniversary, continues to be a source of pride.

Nurture

“Dunamais was developed in the 1990s as a result of local demand for arts and cultural infrastructure,” said Michelle. “When Laois County Council moved its offices and library from the courthouse complex, it took the opportunity to develop an arts centre within the building to nurture the

thriving arts base in the community,” she said.

“Approximately €2million was invested in the refurbishment of the old courthouse/County Council buildings and the construction of new spaces and facilities with the installation of a state-of-the-art theatre and cinema equipment,” Michelle said.

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht contributed €800,000, with €200,000 coming from Laois County Council. Another €1million went into the coffers through local fundraising.

Lorraine McEvoy O’Callaghan, PR manager, said that memorable nights have included: The Chieftains, accompanied by Laois Harpist Tríona Marshall to mark the centre’s 10th anniversary; Druid Theatre Company’s week-long run of ‘Druid Murphy’; Fidget Feet aerial dancers soaring over children’s heads and Ballet Ireland’s festive favourite, ‘The Nutcracker.’

Famous Hoodie

“Local productions are always massively popular including those by Portlaoise Musical Society; Portlaoise Panto Group and Laois Open Door Theatre. Other significant memories include a visit from President Michael D. Higgins in 2012 and the receipt of actor Robert Sheehan’s famous hoodie from RTE’s popular ‘Love Hate’ series during his ambassadorship of Dunamais Arts Centre,” said Lorraine.

“Successful exhibitions included a show by Laois artist Gemma Guihan, where a ticketed queue system had to be arranged and all artworks sold on opening night.”

On Parade

The centre kick-started its 20th anniversary celebrations as grand marshals of the Portlaoise St. Patrick’s Day parade, with a colourful 12ft high branded float.

“We look forward to an autumn variety concert to celebrate the vast and varied array of local arts on our stage and an exhibition specially curated by local children, among many special events,” the director said.

The centre is not without its challenges. “Rising costs in all areas mean we must rely on the support of local community fundraising as well as funding from the Arts Council and Laois County Council.

“Limited resources and time are also major challenges, but we have a dedicated and loyal team who work extremely hard to succeed against all the odds,” Michelle said.

“We hope to launch a more mobile-friendly website as well as to refurbish our workshop spaces and theatre bar areas. Further down the line, we would like to also upgrade the auditorium seating, all for the increased comfort and benefit of our audiences.”

** Dunamais Arts Centre can be contacted on: 057-8663355, www.dunamais.ie*

Two new sculptures for Portlaoise town



Laois County Council is commissioning two permanent public art sculptures under the Per Cent for Art scheme for the roundabout entering Portlaoise at O’Moore Park on the Abbeyleix Road from exit 17 off the M7 and at Lower Main Street, Portlaoise.

The closing date for receipt of stage one completed application form, with supporting documentation and material, is 12 noon, Friday, August 9.

Laois County Council and the Portlaoise Public Art Committee are keen to feature some of the town’s

many hidden historical and cultural assets in a contemporary way and to highlight their importance to modern day life.

Applicants can make enquiries to Rina Whyte, email rinawhyte@yahoo.com, phone: 087-2389591.

ART CENTRES FOR THE FUTURE



An idea for the arts in Tullamore began percolating nearly 20 years ago; it had a form and energy and was envisioned as a community arts centre. Since the beginning of time, art has been a great connector of people. Through creativity, humans have expressed themselves, communicated and shared experiences.

The intrinsic fundamentals of art are only becoming more prescient in our expanding world: creativity, connection and the communication it delivers remains as vital now as prehistoric human drawings on cave walls. The immense benefits of the arts within the arts centre model for communities are becoming widely recognised, with it being as important as the church; post office; pub and local shop in some areas. It is a hub both for public engagement and for artists, for the production and presentation of work. Artists recognise that arts centres provide a more vibrant environment in which to develop work, places where they can connect with potential audiences during the creative process. They offer an extensive range of services and platforms for engagement, attracting audiences the sector usually finds hard to reach.

Arts centres are not only havens for artists developing work; they also can deliver cost-effective social impact and creative education. They have a role in providing opportunities for older people to avoid isolation and loneliness, in keeping people well, or helping those who are not. There is a strong relationship between arts and cultural engagement and educational attainment. There are documented improvements in literacy, when young people take part in drama and library activities, and better performance in maths and languages, when they participate in structured music activities.

Increasing pressure on public subvention means the arts sector has to work harder than ever to prove its value in a variety of public frameworks, and the arts centre of the future is going to have to look very different to what it does today. The case for public support for the arts centre is more viable within a multidisciplinary context.

Forward-looking arts centres and organisations are focusing on the coalescence of artistic excellence and social and economic impact with the inclusive concept of the 'creative economy' at its core. The 'creative economy' stems out of the model of 'creative industries' and its importance is recognised almost by every government in the world. Arts centres of now and the future are part of this creative economy.

Art centres have the opportunity to grow and expand to reflect the evolving culture we live in, with cultural, social and economic significance. They incorporate such activities as advertising; architecture; art and antique markets; designer fashion; video; film; photography; music; performing arts; visual arts; publishing; software; computer games; virtual reality; augmented reality and artificial

intelligence technologies; electronic publishing; radio and television; craft and design.

Art centres will need to buckle up for this new adventure as multi-disciplinary sites that break down barriers, allowing accessibility and open engagement not just within specific art practices but also in how the 'arts centre' perceives itself and what its function is and will be within a community; town; city and county. This suggests that the arts centre is an iterative concept, requiring reforming, reshaping and reimagining with cultural transitions and regenerations.

Art centres of the future have multiple contexts as brokers of ideas; sites for research; connectors of creativity; hubs for cultural, academic and industry partnerships; start-ups and enterprises for finding and delivering solutions to health, science, inclusive design, education and environmental challenges, to mention a few.

Arts centres are also havens for amateur artists, groups and community organisations and have been shown to be a successful and sustainable strategy for revitalising rural towns. They can deliver cost-effective social impact with accessibility and inclusivity to our elderly, disabled and marginalised groups, with creative education for the young, elderly and all members of our community.

A community arts centre at the core of Tullamore, that can link into and work together with existing and future cultural infrastructure, such as the productive and multi-purpose Birr Theatre and Arts Centre, is a long-term investment in the cultural, social and economic future of this county.

As an economic driver, the arts centre can create jobs and produce tax revenue; stimulate business activity; attract tourism revenue; and contribute to the development of a unique and Offaly centric innovative and robust creative and entertainment sector.

It can be an educational asset with art programmes that foster young imaginations and facilitate critical thinking, communications and innovation skills for our children and young people; and a catalyst hub, engaging citizens in civic discourse, dramatising important issues and creating experiences that can be shared by all in our community.

- Ann Lawlor, independent curator, creative producer and member of the action group for Tullamore community arts centre #living heARTlands A catalyst for cultural, social and economic development in Tullamore and county.

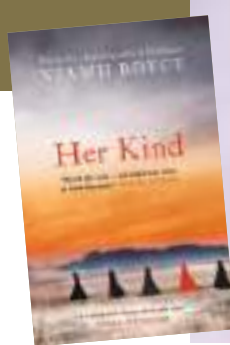
facebook.com/tullamore.arts



Wicker sculptures unveiled

St Christopher's Services and Longford County Council joined forces earlier this year to create two striking wicker sculptures in the Albert Reynolds Peace Park - formerly the Mall - Longford town. The sculptures, in the shape of a dog, were created in collaboration with artist Aidan Crotty and were placed in the community garden, where a number of herbs and fruits were planted previously.

From wolves to witchcraft



Niamh Boyce is continuing her successful run with a hugely positive reaction to the publication of her second novel 'Her Kind' published by Penguin. "I was thrilled when 'Her Kind' was nominated for the EU prize for literature and received such positive reviews," she said.

"It's a thriller inspired by the real-life sorcery trial of Alice Kytler in Kilkenny," Niamh said. "She was accused of witchcraft by a local bishop, of leading a 'vile sect' of sorceresses, usurping the power of the church and consorting with demons. It is a landmark case in the history of witchcraft trials, predating the European witch trials by 200 years, but bearing many of its characteristics," she said.

Pearl Diving

Niamh immersed herself in research for the book. "Six years passed between the first draft and publication. It was a challenging yet fascinating process. My research had me delving into many subjects, including wolves; bees; pearl diving; the annals; witchcraft; archeology; history and folklore. The difficult part was balancing the writing and intensive research with work and real-life duties.

The feedback indicates that all the hard work has been worthwhile. "It's wonderful that readers are as fascinated and moved by the story of these women as I was. I think it is important that Alice Kytler and Petronelle de Midia are written back into history."

Bog People

Niamh who is on a year's leave from the library services is working on two novels at present, revising one 'The Spirit Cabinet', and writing the first draft of another about ancient bog people.

There are also literary events to attend. "I'm at Kildare Readers in October; and the Laois Festival of Writing and Music, Leaves, in November." She has also worked with Laois Library Services.

Structured

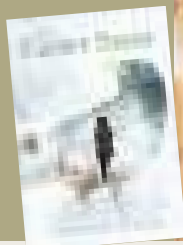
"I have a fairly structured approach to novel writing. I write the first draft by hand, and usually

early in the day. When that draft is complete, I type the book up and read it over to see what revisions are needed. That's when the longest part of the process begins, the re-writing. It's a much more chaotic phase, its when I am trying to make chronological sense of the story, put a shape on the narrative," Niamh said.

"I love the work to be honest, especially the first draft stage when the story can go anywhere, it can be very exciting."

When asked by aspiring writers for advice, Niamh underlines the value of sheer hard work. She also believes in being kind to yourself. "It can be hard to keep going. There are no built-in rewards for writers and artists, and we usually work alone. So, when you finish a piece of work, a story, or a poem, or difficult chapter - reward yourself, mark that achievement, don't wait for publication or outside approval."

Midlands author on the call of home



Tullamore-based Westmeath native Catherine Wilkie takes her inspiration for her debut novel 'The Easter Snow' from the landscape of Offaly and Westmeath, weaving a story that moves with the seasons, one that is tracked by the flowers that keep time for us all through the changes in light – snowdrops, daffodils, tulips, bluebells, roses. While a nursing home may seem like an unlikely stage for a story, it is here that we meet the central characters that draw the readers into the rhythm of daily midlands Ireland life.

"I spent a lot of time in and out of nursing homes, visiting my grand uncle when he was admitted after a stroke in the early 2000s," Catherine said. "I was always struck with the diverse nature of the people who had come to call those places home, and often found myself imagining the stories behind each person and the circumstances that led them to being there."

Set in modern-day Offaly and Westmeath, the novel begins just as spring is coming. We meet Lily, head nurse in Killeens, the local nursing home, and follow her as she steers a fraught path between motherhood and carer for the ageing population of the local town, Lisheen. The arrival of a stranger – Marianne – heralds a new path for both women and the residents of the nursing home, and we see how that despite our best efforts, the call of home is often stronger than our will to escape it.

Inspired by the story of her own family – her grand uncle Paddy Young, who stayed on the family farm and his sister Lily, who left Killaream Co. Westmeath, to find her fortune in New York – the author has contrived to reunite brother and sister despite their never seeing each other again once Lily had left the homeplace in the 1950s.

As so often is the case in Ireland, stories and characters that appear to have distant origins and paths are actually interwoven as relations and the commonalities of human nature unfold.

Catherine who was born in Streamstown, Westmeath, was a Bord na Mona head ecologist for 18 years, responsible for restoring many bogs, including Abbeyleix bog, Co. Laois. Having been made redundant, she decided to turn to her love of the arts and write a book

Ballymahon man builds on novel idea

Engineering isn't usually a career you would associate with writing but in his debut novel, Ballymahon man Adrian Duncan proves that creativity runs in many forms and good stories can come from all backgrounds.

Adrian launched 'Love Notes from a German Building Site' on April 11. The novel tells the story of how Paul, a young Irish engineer, follows Evelyn to Berlin and begins work on the renovation of a commercial building in Alexanderplatz.

Wrestling with a new language, on a site running behind schedule, and with a relationship in flux, he becomes increasingly untethered.

Set against the structural evolution of a sprawling city, this meditation on language, memory and yearning is underpinned by the site's physical reality.

As the narrator explores the mind's fragile architecture, he begins to map his own strange geography through a series of notebooks or love notes.

Paul's story will speak to anyone who has known what it is to be in love, or exiled, or simply alone.



Booked OUT



Having given up farming to go into selling rare and antiquarian books, PJ Tynan of Courtwood Books, has just released catalogue number 45, containing 300 items of Irish interest, despite the difficulties of attracting customers in a digital age.

He sells online as well as at a small number of fairs: Fethard in February; Wexford around the time of the Opera Festival and Kilkenny in August.

Most of his customers are in Ireland, with Britain and the U.S. accounting for about 20 per cent of sales. The books are mostly sourced in this country, at house clearances and auctions. "Sometimes my customers want to downsize their collections, so I buy from them also."

Having worked for four years in England, PJ returned to Ireland where he continued his interest in reading and collecting books in a small way. He frequented Don Roberts' secondhand bookshop, Kilkenny, and started selling reprinted copies of Canon O'Hanlon's 'History of the Queen's County' door-to-door locally.

Visiting the Book Barrow fairs at Dublin's Mansion House intensified his interest. He took the plunge into selling at the fairs and realised that he had found his true calling. He soon built up a sizeable collection at his home, filling any available space, sometimes to his wife Joan's consternation.

At a time when attention spans are shorter; so much content is available online and when clutter busters

urge us to get rid of our books, the effects are being felt, particularly in the middle range of the market, PJ said. "People to a certain extent have turned away from collecting. Houses are often smaller and a lot of people are not into what they see as clutter. There's so much available online also."

"There's still plenty of interest in books at the top of the market; it's the middle bit that's missing. You'd sell a good amount of books for €10 to €20 and for €100 plus, but it's the €25 to €75 part that has fallen off," PJ said. "Quality has become much more important, it now being difficult to sell books which are not near perfect."

As a collector as well as a vendor – his main interest has been Irish, English and American literature, lately moving more towards history, particularly local history – he is keen on tracking down one book.

"I sold Charles Coote's Statistical Surveys of the Queen's County' which was published around 1800 to someone I know when I wasn't that interested in local history. I've been kicking myself ever since."

PJ Tynan can be contacted via email on: pjt@courtwoodbooks.ie www.courtwoodbooks.ie



Portlaoise book holds back the years

What is hailed as the most detailed book ever written about the town of Portlaoise, is now out in paperback, written by retired school principal, writer and historian, John Dunne. Ranging from a description of life in Maryborough in the 1700s, through an account of shopkeepers on Main Street, to a history of the Methodist chapel and a detailed survey of local music in the 20th century, its pages are teeming with generations of townspeople, many dead and gone, many still with us; some famous, some forgotten except by loved ones. All contributed to the fabric of the county town.

As well as page after page of interesting facts drawn from four centuries, there are intriguing chapters entitled 'The Golden Croft' and 'Kings, Queens and the Missing Ancestor.' 'A Book About Portlaoise' is now available at €15 from Allbooks, Lyster Square, Portlaoise, and from www.portlaoisepictures.com.

Finding inspiration through a change of place and pace



Poets; novelists; playwrights; librettists; scriptwriters; writers for radio; travel-writers and journalist-authors have come to abide for a week focused entirely on their creative work. For this writers' residency in the middle of the midlands, in the heritage town of Birr, most have come from this country, but some from abroad.

"In the pilot residency, 2014, there were three notable writers. Since then four per year have been selected: two for July and two for October. The recently announced winners of the 2019 Birr writers' residency are Cath Drake, Sarah Moore Fitzgerald, Ronan Ryan and Michelle Walshe," said Rosalind Fanning, host.

Over the past six years of the residency/retreat which is supported by Offaly County Council, writers have been selected through a rigorous application process in conjunction with Offaly arts office. "Though many have had some experience of better known residencies or artists retreats, for exceptional new and younger writers, they may not," Rosalind said.

"Being awarded brings no obligations to perform readings, or other time away from their work-focus in school classrooms. Anything impromptu is the choice of an individual writer," she said.

"The residency simply offers professional writers the opportunity and time to spend a week in

the centrally-located Georgian townhouse, with its country home atmosphere. Tranquil, perhaps 'bohemian', it is full to brimming with antiques and books and objects with stories," Rosalind said.

"Though nearly all writers have so far chosen to write in their rooms, there is also an arts studio – the Tin Jug Studio – and a walled courtyard garden," said the host.

"Whether fine-tuning a current writing project prior to publication or performance or starting something new, the purpose of the Birr residency is also as much about finding inspiration through a change of place and pace."

Writers are encouraged to benefit from local stimuli, whether by rambling around town and Birr Castle demesne, or walking into the countryside. "They are particularly encouraged out to enjoy local cafés, have conversations with the diverse population, and indeed do some research and writing in the beautiful library," Rosalind said.

"There are unexpected histories of people present and past, with connections to afar. And immersion in the places within town and beyond, of monastic and scholarly centuries when ancient laws were enacted, and of Birr's scientific past and future; of exploration of the environment from community garden-growing to the boglands and nearby mountains," she said.

"Many of the Irish writers who have come to stay at Brendan House have won international writing awards and are included in anthologies from the Americas to Australia. Many have or have had distinguished careers in education; academia; journalism; science and media."

Rosalind has run the arts studio for 19 years. "It is a local hub for artists' gatherings; meetings on environmental matters; arts workshops; talks; seasonal art exhibitions and art classes, and involvements with the town's multiple arts festivals. Her husband is a journalist, poet and woodcarver."



Offaly soprano hits THE HIGH NOTES

By Anthony Sullivan

It's often said that the voice is the greatest musical instrument of all. When some people sing, something magical happens. They possess a power to transform an ordinary moment into something akin to an out-of-body experience, where your soul, in a veil of lush golden heavenly sound, is transported to some other dimension, maybe the closest one to heaven itself.

I've been lucky to journey through that transcendental portal on a couple of occasions. Rainey Qualley and Hannah Anders, thank you. Yvonne O'Toole, Offaly's very own star soprano, you too.

The video for the Birr soprano's new song, 'Angel Maria' – a delicate brave and enchanting fusion of the popular Sarah McLachlan hit, 'Angel', and the hymn 'Ave Maria' – premiered on Offaly news on Facebook in May.

I asked Yvonne why these two songs?

"I love the song 'Angel' and from my classical background, I always sang 'Ave Maria.' I thought merging the two, mixing a bit of modern with

some classical, would be nice and would show that I can do both. They are two beautiful pieces that merge so well."

How did the video for 'Angel Maria' come together?

"I worked with Peadar [Gill] and the vibe I wanted was to match the song, something soft, gentle. It's very smooth, very calm the whole way through. I'm a big believer in less-is-more.

"When you say to people, 'Angel', and then 'Ave Maria', their reaction is that they're two completely different songs but they're so well known. You don't have to be into classical music to know an 'Ave Maria.' And you don't have

to be into more contemporary ballads to know 'Angel', or 'In The Arms of an Angel', which is what a lot of people call it.

"So it's nice for them to hear the two because I can break into the classical range with the second part of it. Then with the video, I think it all really works together."

So how did Yvonne first discover that she was a soprano?

"I always loved to sing. I was in a small country school, and we had a local choir that went to Scór. We did a Christmas concert when I was nine and my teacher put me forward to sing 'O Holy Night' in the church. My mam told me that everyone said that she needed to get my voice trained, and that I was a fantastic singer.

At ten, mammy sent me to voice training lessons with a local lady in Birr, Deirdre Hanniffy, and I was with her until I was 18. When I was 15, I got to sing 'Nella Fantasia', the first song where it hit me that I was able to hit all these high notes. Deirdre did a concert every year and I'd sing at it, in my ball gown, and that was a really big deal – the Oxmantown Singers is what we were called. I went on to sing for Feis Ceoil. When I flew the nest from Deirdre, I went to Tullamore Music Academy, to Ciaran Brady, and I did my exams with him with the Royal Irish Academy."

What other opportunities have you had as a soprano?

"I've sung at a lot of charity concerts, the big classical pieces like 'Ave Maria', 'Nella Fantasia', and 'O Mio Babbino.' When I was a Bunratty entertainer, we were constantly taking the top-line and exploring four-part harmonies. My current voice teacher, Marie Walsh, I've been with since 2009. I've got to perform in Dromoland Castle and other amazing places. I played one of the lead female roles, 'Emma' in 'Jekyll & Hyde' by Tullamore Musical Society recently. I was in 'Sweeney Todd', with Tullamore two years ago as well, playing the lead female role, 'Johanna.'"

What's next?

A concert in Charleville Castle, Tullamore, on October 12, accompanied by a string quartet. I'll be performing a set that includes well known classical pieces, traditional Irish ballads, and my take on more contemporary songs. It's a fundraiser for the castle, one of the most distinctive and beautiful landmarks in Offaly, and the midlands."

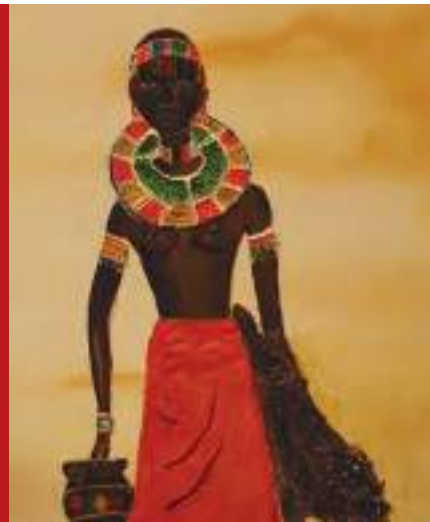
Burning ambition

After moving to Portarlinton in 2001, Dubliner Barbara Askin joined an art class in the town to meet people. "I also did carving and pyrography, the art of burning images on wood," she said. "I had a love of arts and crafts from childhood.

"I joined Eamonn Byrne's class at the French Quarter café and I have produced some very successful pieces," said Barbara who opened an exhibition of her art and pyrography at the café on June 9.

Having been taught pyrography locally by Mary Delaney, Barbara fell in love with the medium. "I particularly enjoyed doing photos," she said. "I mostly paint in acrylics these days but have done oils in the past. I paint three to four days a week as I also design knitwear and continue to volunteer in local groups," Barbara said.

Barbara's exhibition on June 9, featured 25 paintings and 15 pieces of pyrography.



'Mask of The Shannon' SELECTED

Following an intense and rigorous process comprising eTender procurement; navigation of a complex brief; two selection panel meetings; much robust debate and a public feedback process, the selection for the sculpture to be sited at the regenerated area of Church Street in Athlone was completed.

The winning sculpture is the creation of artist Rory Breslin and it is the 'Mask of the Shannon.' Mayo-based Rory said he was thrilled to have had his artwork chosen, and to work at a time when the townscape is undergoing such dynamic change. The famous historical feature is expected to become an iconic piece in the story of Athlone and perhaps for many it will be an introduction to this imposing figure, about which a great deal might not be known.

The piece is an adaptation of Edward Smyth's Custom House keystone, and etched into the reverse of it are tracks and pads that are an imitative of a modern circuit board – think your phone innards when it comes asunder – to denote connectivity.

Arts officer Miriam Mulrennan said it is always rewarding when a new piece of sculpture provides fertile ground for discussion. "Sometimes this

discussion can polarise audiences but more often than not and perhaps more usefully, it is the 'story' of a piece of art, this 'Why this piece?' and the 'Why here now?' that ignites conversation," she said.

School visits

"Rory's piece presents a very definitive story relating to the Shannon and Athlone, and learning about it has been fascinating. The school visits component of the public viewing process was particularly rich, with students eager to engage with the piece bringing the story of its origin alive, and very much responding to the more abstracted reverse digital imagery," Miriam said.

"Pointing us to the history of the river, the bounty on its shorelines that sustained families, industries and towns through the ages, and perhaps ironically also commenting on our ever-pervasive connectivity on the reverse of the



mask, Athlone's new sculpture will no doubt please, bemuse, incense, displace, displease. This rainbow of reactions; emotions and discussions are absolutely part and parcel of it all," said the arts officer.

Work on the sculpture has commenced in the artist's studio in Mayo, following technical discussions with the engineering team. Athlone's latest artistic feature should arrive in town in early 2020.

'Kicking the bucket' explores the meaning of legacy

'Kicking the bucket' is a much bandied about phrase surrounding death. Laois visual artist Pat Wallis recently brought a programme of that very name to her native county, availing of funding from the arts office at Laois County Council.

"The initiative investigates creatively, ideas and emotions relating to mortality, and provides participants with a safe way of sharing stories and experiences of illness, dying and death in compassionate, personal and artistic ways," said Pat.

As a visual artist, she had participated in the programme in Limerick where it was co-founded by visual artist Sinéad Dinneen and arts administrator Katie Verling. It was sparked by their love of the arts along with their shared experiences of chronic illness and near-death moments.

"They founded 'Kicking the Bucket' to explore the lighter and creative side of illness, death, dying and grief which became the topic for an RTE Radio One 'Documentary on One,'" said Pat.

"The 'Kicking the Bucket' programme in Limerick was widely acclaimed with highly positive experiences reported by participants. Some gained new insights and ways of thinking, others greater emotional connection and improved

communication on the difficult subject of death," she said.

Having witnessed the benefits at first hand, Pat sought to introduce the programme to Laois. She found a keen supporter in Michelle de Forge, director of the Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise. Michelle provided the venue and promoted an exhibition by Sinéad 'Whisper and Beyond.'

The exhibition was a series of work inspired by Sinéad's own diagnosis with stage four ovarian cancer, and her subsequent journey through chronic illness. Sinéad instinctively turned to the art process to help document and understand her illness. The powerful and thought provoking exhibition was on show for four weeks.

A number of artists' talks took place, facilitated by Sinéad. They opened up discussion and communicated the sometimes poignant and often undocumented experiential dimension of illness, explored in 'Kicking the Bucket'.



Pat Wallis, Katie Verling, Sinéad Dinneen, JP O'Gorman and Michelle de Forge.

Following discussions with Stella Moran, director of services at the Cuisle Centre, Portlaoise, which supports people with cancer, a six-week programme was put in place for participants of the centre. 'Kicking the Bucket' had arrived in Laois.

The programme which ran every Tuesday from March 5 to April 9 last, was facilitated by Sinéad and Katie who travelled from Limerick every week. "It resulted in a rich valuable experience of listening and sharing of personal stories focusing on mortality, in a safe and compassionate way while exploring the meaning of legacy. Lots of laughter was very much part of the programme also," Pat said.

*** Any group interested in the 'Kicking the Bucket' programme should phone: 087-6409401.**

*** www.rte.ie**



Midlands musicians in celebratory concerts

Fifteen young musicians from the midlands joined an orchestra of professional musicians, second and third level music students, for two celebratory concerts over two days in April, marking the close of 'Sinfonia 2019'.

Developed by Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath in partnership with Maynooth University music department, the Sinfonia orchestral residency programme offered young piano; strings; woodwind and percussion players aged between 11 and 18 the opportunity to work with some of the country's leading conductors and players. This was done under the guidance of artistic director Andrew Synnott and deputy director Karen Ní Bhroin.

Following months of intensive rehearsals during which their musical skills were put to the test, the young people, as part of the full 35-strong orchestra, showcased their growth and development for families and friends in the atrium of Áras an Chontae, Westmeath, and at the Maynooth University Aula Maxima. Their dynamic and polished set list included music by Ravel, Poulenc and Mozart, as

well as the world premiere of 'Slán le Rí Thorai' by Scottish composer Padruig Morrison.

Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath is part of Music Generation, Ireland's national music education programme initiated by Music Network and co-funded by U2; The Ireland Funds; the Department of Education and Skills and Local Music Education Partnerships. Locally, Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath is led by Offaly County Council in partnership with Westmeath County Council, Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board and Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board.

Accessible

Sinfonia is one of a series of programmes and initiatives created by Music Generation Offaly/

Westmeath to create affordable, accessible vocal and instrumental tuition to children and young people ages up to 18 in both counties. This orchestral project is intended to reach young musicians who may or may not have had prior ensemble playing experience, to boost their confidence and capabilities, while also providing teaching and mentoring experience to music students from Maynooth University.

Sinfonia 2019/2020 – the third edition of the programme – is open to hardworking, enthusiastic string, woodwind, brass and percussion instrumentalists ages 11 to 19. Harp and piano players are also welcome. To find out more about how to get involved in the future, email: musicgen@offalycoco.ie or see: musicgenerationoffalywestmeath.ie.

Singfest Songsters take centrestage



Thirteen singers from Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath's Singfest community choirs took centre stage during the second annual Music Generation national musicians' day in Athlone IT, in April.

The event brought together 150 professional musicians from all backgrounds and musical genres, together with management and administrative staff from across 21 Music Generation locations.

The delegates' afternoon started on the right note as the 'Singfest Songsters', an ensemble of 13 singers from the midlands, ranging in age from eight to 16, treated them to a stunning choral performance of three songs: 'O Re Mi', 'Old Abram Brown', and The Greatest Showman hit, 'A Million Dreams.'

Flagship initiative

Members of the ensemble were drawn from among the 50-plus young people in Offaly and Westmeath participating in one of

three Singfest community choirs. Singfest, a flagship initiative of Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath and Sing Ireland, together with members of the Irish Youth Choir, offers young people with a love for singing the opportunity to develop their musical performance skills together with local and international choral conductors.

The choirs meet monthly for ensemble rehearsals in Athlone IT and their work culminated in an end-of-term gala concert, with this year's event having taken place on May 25.

Hosted by the programme's national development office, the Music Generation National Musicians' Day is a day-long knowledge sharing and networking event that brings together

practicing and professional musicians from diverse areas of expertise. They share a common goal – to create inspiring encounters through music for children and young people.

Now in its second year, the forum creates the space and time for musicians to share practice and insights and to gain ideas and inspiration from their peers and colleagues.

Inspiration

There was no shortage of inspiration arising from the Singfest Songsters' performance, led by musicians and mentors Catherine Finerty; Geraldine Relph; Hilary Roche; Triona Walsh and Andrew Yau, with development officer for Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath, Margaret Broome.

Tuition

The team gathered again in May for the Singfest Gala Concert, one of a series of end-of-term events involving just some of the 7,000 children and young people accessing tuition through the Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath programme. There was a 'Secondary School SingOUT!' for second level participants; two 'Big Sings' for primary school singers, and singers of all ages and abilities joined a 'Community Come and Sing' at Athlone IT.

For more information about Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath, the Singfest programme and concert series, visit; musicgenerationoffalywestmeath.ie, or email: musicgen@offalycoco.ie.



Portlaoise concerts will spark joy

Midlands concert goers have a varied line-up of events to look forward to next autumn. Hosted by the arts office at Laois County Council, Music Network will present Tara Breen, Laoise Kelly, Josephine March and Nell Ní Chróinín in a performance at St. Peter's Church of Ireland, Market Square, Portlaoise, on Sunday, September 15 at 7pm.

Tara Breen will be on fiddle; Laoise Kelly on harp; Josephine Marsh on accordion and Nell Ní Chróinín, voice.

Four of Ireland's finest traditional musicians will join forces for a performance that layers Laoise Kelly's exuberant harp playing with a gorgeous exchange of melodies between Josephine Marsh's accordion and Tara Breen's fiddle, all topped off by Nell Ní Chróinín's crystal-clear singing voice.

Tickets are priced at €15/€12, from Dunamais Arts Centre, www.dunamais.ie, phone: 057-8663355.

Next up will be an event hosted by Music Generation Laois Music Network 'Bangers and Crash' which will take place in Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise on Tuesday, October 8 at 7 pm.

Alex Petcu, Emma King and Brian Dungan will be on percussion. The brainchild of musician extraordinaire Alex Petcu, 'Bangers and Crash' is an Irish collective of leading percussionists. Exploring cultural influences from around the world, including Afro-Cuban, flamenco and Javanese gamelan, and highlighting topical themes such as globalisation through the music of contemporary composers Nils Frahm, Steve Reich and Philip Glass, this concert offers appeal to all ages.

The programme will also explore sounds of the future through Alex Petcu's new instruments created especially for the performance of a new Music Network commission.

Tickets cost: €15/€10, from Dunamais Arts Centre.

Arrivals Departures



Photos from Creative Ireland's 'Arrivals Departures' project, which took place in The Atrium, County Buildings on May 18th, celebrating the Swift's return to Westmeath. Another multidisciplinary event will be held in September to mark their departure to the Congo.

'Only Us' marks end-of-year for theatre groups



Laois and Mountrath youth theatres presented a collaborative end-of-year show in the Dunamais Arts Centre on May 17. Both groups had developed a working foundation in theatre practice over their year-long programmes. They had amassed the appropriate vocabulary to work with improvisation, acting and performance, group work and collaboration to make their show.

Throughout their final term they focused on developing this production. Both groups were facilitated and directed by Louise White to make 'Only Us.' The new show was devised from their own working of the famous 1950s novel 'Lord of the Flies' by William Golding that focuses on a group of schoolchildren stranded on an

uninhabited island and their attempt to govern themselves.

Commitment

"The novel investigates human nature, if we are inherently savage and power hungry and if we can rule without conflict," Louise said. "The members of Mountrath and Portlaoise created a work true to

their own interests and performance capabilities. They learned about the fun and the formal aspects of creating their own performance, about taking responsibility as part of a collective and about the focus and commitment required to take part in full scale production," she said.

"The performance helped them to

grow in confidence in their own abilities. Putting on their own show is a crucial aspect of young people's theatre. It is a very special time that empowers them to seek fulfillment in their 'creative' selves, to connect with new modes of expression and feel validated and proud to share their learning in public. They were amazing," Louise said.



Magical music at the Malthouse

To kick off Music Generation Laois's 2019 season, some of the most celebrated names in traditional Irish music headed to Stradbally for a weekend concert series housed for the third year in the magnificent confines of The Malt House on May 3 and 4.

Renowned folk duo Zoe Conway and John McIntyre wowed audiences with songs, tunes and a collaboration with the Music Generation Laois trad orchestra on the Friday night. Michael Rooney's collaboration with the Music Generation Laois senior harp ensemble included a solo performance of 'An Cruitire' by Michael Rooney, dedicated to Music Generation Laois harper Siobhan Buckley.

Saturday night opened with Music Generation Laois' junior trad group performing with concertina player Ernestine Healy, ending with a lively tune composed by Ernestine.

Scottish musicians Catriona McKay and Chris Stout's spellbinding performance captivated the packed Malt House on Saturday night, culminating with collaboration with the Music Generation Laois trad orchestra that had the

audience on the edge of its seats.

The magical weekend also saw the album launch of Tommy Fitzharris' on flute and Donal McCague's on fiddle acclaimed album, 'Bank of Turf.'

To learn more about Music Generation Laois's packed programme of events and festivals, see: www.musicgenerationlaois.ie.

Full house for Spink Comhaltas Concert



Spink Comhaltas played to an audience of 500 in the Manor Hotel, Abbeyleix, in March.

The event was a memorial concert for the late Tom Bonham who passed away in March 2018 after a long battle with Multiple Sclerosis (MS.) The concert paid tribute to Tom as well as raising funds for MS Laois.

It featured the Spink Comhaltas Trad Orchestra, comprising 40 musicians playing the full range of traditional Irish instruments: whistles; flutes; fiddles; banjos; mandolins; accordions; concertinas; harp; cello; piano; pipes and bodhrans. The main orchestral arrangements were led by Paula Dowling, the principal music teacher in Spink, with the senior musician arrangements led by David Vesey.

Blend

The evening was a blend of traditional Irish music and choral performances from the 32-strong Abbeyleix/Ballyroan choir. The group performances were complemented by

entertainment from dancers, solo singing and an excerpt from John B Keane's classic play 'The Field.'

The closing performance was 'Mo Ghile Mear' by the full Spink Comhaltas Orchestra with Clióna Dowling-McDonald, Amy Fitzpatrick and Laura Vesey on vocals.

Speaking on behalf of her family, Anita Bonham extended thanks to all the performers as well as the organising committee for taking the initiative to make the concert happen. She noted that Tom would have enjoyed the performance but would have been humbled by the level of respect dedicated to him.

Lawrence Vesey, chairman of Spink Comhaltas, expressed thanks on behalf of the management committee to everyone who made the concert possible.

Journey

Lawrence noted that the performance was an example of the journey that Spink Comhaltas can bring musicians on, from the age of seven all to adulthood. Spink Comhaltas is one of eight Comhaltas branches in Laois. With a comprehensive instrument bank, it prepares musicians for Comhaltas Fleadh and other competitions, music exams, and local community performances.

Over recent years, a number of Spink Comhaltas' musicians have won All-Ireland medals. The love and skill of playing traditional Irish music is fostered and passed onto the next generation.

A total of €9,189 was raised from the concert and the cheque was presented to MS Laois on April 28. Photographs are available on Spink Comhaltas Facebook page as well as on: www.SpinkComhaltas.ie A commemorative DVD has also been made.

Longford rocks on

By Jessica Thompson

'Music knows no boundaries'

School of Rock in Longford has been at the heart of the county's creative scene since 2014, creating a space for young people to play contemporary music together, have fun and perform in groups.

It was originally a programme for early school leavers, set up by Shane Crossan who works for the Longford School Completion Programme. Shane asked a few local musicians to help run a programme for teenagers who were gradually dropping out of school but who had a demonstrated interest in playing music.

The programme started off with approximately 14 students but word spread fast and more and more people started to join.

"Music knows no boundaries. It doesn't care if you're a straight 'A' student or if you're struggling to pass, so we decided to open the programme to all teenagers in the midlands," said Shane.

"Such was the demand that in 2016 we opened the junior school. Last year we opened a children's programme, 'Pitch & Pulse' and a choral programme 'Light My Choir.' Next year we are expanding to include keyboard performance; digital music production; music video production and an adult music programme."

While the music academy grade system is a great way to teach students incrementally, it doesn't provide many opportunities to perform, Shane contended. And performance is the life blood of music.

"Just to see kids and teenagers playing in a band on stage for the first time and nailing the tune is the best feeling ever," he said.

Infinite Possibilities

"They have this look on their face of 'I can't believe it... I'm actually doing this... I'm really on stage, nailing this tune in front of a live

audience.' And from that moment onwards, you can see their minds opening up to the infinite possibilities of their lives in music."

School of Rock recently undertook its first large ensemble piece, 'Beats in the Barracks', funded by Creative Longford. Over six days, 30 teenagers created and performed six new songs and together created a 25 minute orchestral ensemble piece 'Separate Ways.'

"It was an electrifying performance and showed what young musicians can achieve together with the right mentors," said Shane.

While there are plenty of rewards and noticeable benefits for anyone involved with School of Rock, there are a number of challenges attached to the programme too.

In order to make music accessible for children from families of all income levels, the pricing structure for School of Rock is low. While academy grade music tuition can typically set a family back €600 to €950 per year, School of Rock costs €260. This means School of Rock runs at a loss every year and requires fundraising activities to make ends meet.

"We have been very fortunate that Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB) give us their premises for free and we have been generously supported by Longford County Arts Office and the Creative Longford programme," Shane remarked.

The name, School of Rock, often gives people a false perception of the programme. While the name was chosen because of the Jack Black film

of the same name, Shane is eager to stress that the school isn't all about rock music.

Contemporary Music

"It's really contemporary music that young people want to play and includes a healthy mix of pop; classic rock; acoustic; rap and country – yes, country," he said.

"You can't run a music school in Longford without embracing country music. But I think we have some distance to go yet before the general public understand what we are about."

The third challenge, Shane added, is the lack of performance venues for teenagers: "They're not adults, so late night pub/club venues are not appropriate. Festival venues and arts venues are infrequent. It takes a lot of organising and energy to organise performance opportunities for the students.

"We recently bought a gig-rig so that we can increase the summer performance opportunities for students. So watch this space: School of Rock is coming soon to a village festival near you!"

With Cruthú Arts Festival in July, School of Rock was back on the streets of Longford as part of the festival's youth arts zone programme, 'Carnival of Adolescent Antics.'

The school will be back in September with an extended programme of music activities. School of Rock is also currently looking for music tutors. For more information, see: www.longfordschoolofrock.com or the School of Rock Facebook page.



Westmeath artists find their tribe

A day in which Westmeath visual artists could ‘find their tribe’; highlight the issues affecting them; and meet key people from relevant agencies, held in the V.A.I. café, Mullingar on April 11, garnered hugely positive feedback.

Facilitated by Noel Kelly of Visual Arts Ireland, the panel discussion involved artists Mel French and Celine Sheridan; Aoife Tunney of the Arts Council; Katriona Gillespie of Luan Gallery and Westmeath arts officer, Miriam Mulrennan. Tracey Tallon of Local Enterprise Westmeath; Paula O’Dorman, county librarian and Una Doris, tourism officer, Westmeath County Council, also spoke.

Among the issues raised were the solitary nature of the profession which can lead to isolation; challenges around time, space, finance and transport; balancing work with family life and other responsibilities; and childcare costs.

The meeting discussed the value of collectives such as the Abbey Road Studios and the Shambles Studios, Athlone; and the availability of library spaces and other public buildings owned by the local authority.

The message from the Arts Council was that while the numbers of practising artists living in Westmeath is high, the number of artists applying for grants is relatively low.

Thirty-nine applications were received by the Arts Council from Westmeath for bursary awards between 2010 and 2017. Three grants were awarded, with a total investment of €13,066.

Workshops and training can be part of a trajectory of assisting artists to apply to the Arts Council and it would be open to discussing how this could be achieved in partnership with local authorities, the meeting heard.

Noel Kelly, CEO, VAI, outlined VAI’s work in creating a secure and safe environment so that visual artists are prepared to take advantage of the wide range of opportunities locally and further afield. He welcomed feedback from Westmeath artists on how this can be specifically supported in Westmeath, citing VAI’s Lifelong Learning programme, support services, and online listings as part of a more detailed solution.

Noel welcomed the support of the Westmeath arts office, with which he will be working to look at a programme of events that will take place later this year.

Mel French said that while attending exhibition openings is invaluable for many reasons, it is often hard to view or take time to engage with the work at that point so returning to the exhibition at a later date is necessary. “When living rurally and distance to travel to these events is greater it might affect an individual’s decision as to whether they attend an actual opening of an exhibition or attend post-opening as attending twice might not be practically or geographically possible,” she said.

“Social media and email mailing lists are an important source when you live and work in isolation to follow and maintain awareness of galleries; artists; institutions and opportunities,” she said.

On the Money

The training supports available from the Local Enterprise Office (LEO), Westmeath, should be an area of focus for artists, Tracey Tallon, senior

enterprise development officer, Westmeath LEO, told the gathering.

Assistance is available with areas such as web and generic marketing as well as social media, she said. Business advice is available either from one of the LEO enterprise officers or through a panel of professional business mentors.

LEO Westmeath has a panel of experienced business mentors, Tracey told the meeting. They can provide advice on areas such as: business planning; taxation; marketing; procurement; and intellectual property rights. A standard mentoring assignment is three three-hour long sessions for €70.

Trading online vouchers are available to businesses with less than ten employees, trading for over six months and developing or enhancing e-commerce websites, Tracey said. “They are available to a maximum value of €2,500 or 50 per cent of eligible expenditure, whichever is the lesser.”

Voucher approval must be gained before incurring any expense and only third party costs will be considered. All third party/supplier invoices must contain proper business details and there is a one-to-one session to help with this, Tracey said.

Vouchers can be used for IT consultation; development or upgrade of an e-commerce website; implementing online payments or booking systems; purchase of internet-related software; purchase of online advertising; developing an app or multi-platform web pages;

Reaching out to the home workers

AtHome is a group of visual artists working from home who meet at the Visual Artists Ireland (VAI) offices in Dublin, every two months, as a way of interacting with other people who may be working in isolation.



Image: Orla Whelan

implementing a digital marketing strategy; and training or skills development to establish and manage an online trading activity.

If artists are creating full-time employment, manufacturing products, they should contact the LEO office to discuss their ventures, Tracey said. Tracey Tallon or Catherine Darby can be contacted on: 044-9338945, see: www.localenterprise.ie/westmeath.

Another type of funding available for manufacturing internationally traded businesses, Tracey told the meeting, is the TAME export grant which supports exhibiting at overseas trade shows. Fifty per cent of expenses, up to a maximum of €2,500, are covered. Eligible expenses are: marketing material, with quotes supplied from three suppliers; exhibitor fees; travel and accommodation.

Playing to the Gallery

In response to both the local and visiting artists' needs, Athlone's Luan Gallery works to strike a balance between artists of national; international; local and regional significance, curator Kattriona Gillespie told the seminar.

Exhibition opportunities are available in three spaces – the gallery; the Abbey Road artists' studios and the atrium, she said.

The selection criteria of the municipal space, Kattriona told the gathering is: suitability of the exhibition relative to the space; scope to develop educational accompaniments; timeliness to the education cycle; relevance of the work to the local environment and gallery audiences; the relevance of the work in response to open call themes; quality of the submission; and suitability to the gallery's mission and objectives.

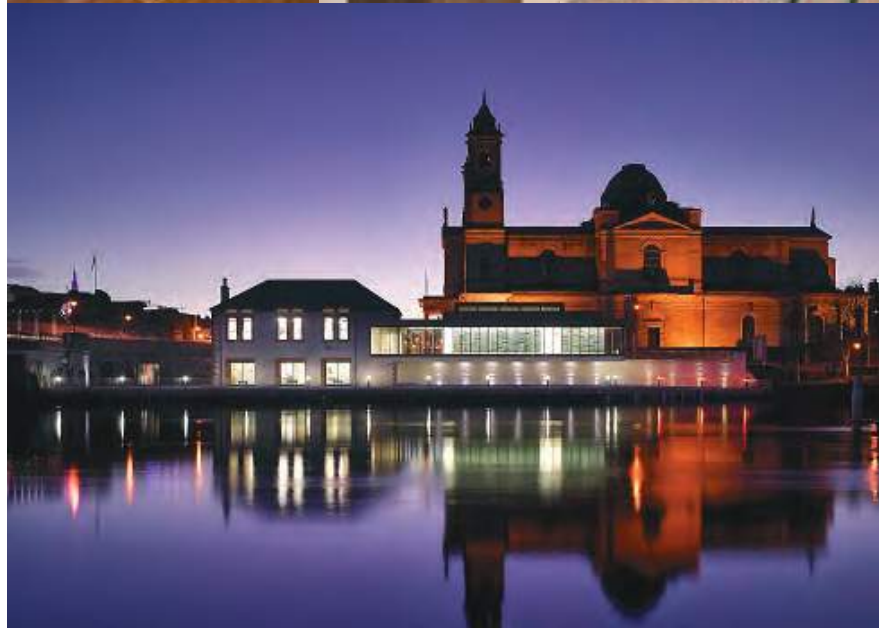
The 2020 open call, which had a closing date of May 11, invited artwork that responded to or addressed the concerns and questions inherent in the concept of 'Queer Migration.'

Luan Gallery engages with the community through artists' talks; collaboration; professional development workshops; panel discussions; guided tours and exhibition opportunities.

Professional development for artists is catered for by the Atelier programme which takes place at Abbey Road studios and offers professional skills workshops, ranging from advice with grants and funding to social media and branding development.

Abbey Road artists' studios has four individual studio spaces available for both short and longterm letting. In addition to the individual studios, there is a large communal space suitable for group workshops and facilitations that can be allocated on a case-by-case basis.

Luan Gallery offers assistance to Abbey Road resident artists with bursary and funding applications.



"As far as I know, the group was originally formed by a small number of artists, mothers working in isolation in Dublin, and who got together in each other's studios initially so as to have contact with other artists," said Paul Roy, a member of the group, an artist who works from his Tyrrellspass studio with some digital and photographic elements as well as being a musician and writer.

"I believe this was around 2013. The group later expanded to include artists who work in a home studio on a broader scale within Ireland and who wished to communicate

and interact with others in the same situation," Paul said.

The membership is generally held at 20, with a variety of different artists with different practices, he said. "Membership is dependent on the same membership criteria to that of VAI membership. The majority of members are visual artists with painters, sculptors and multimedia practitioners among them. Members also have writing practices and teaching roles.

Critique

"The general format of the meetings is that there is a written text – often

a chapter of a particular book – sent to all members for consideration which members read prior to the meeting, with discussion based around this. There also are opportunities for peer critique of members' work within the form of the meetings. Aside from this, we sometimes have guest speakers in particular fields pertaining to overall arts practice at our meetings," Paul said.

"I can only speak for myself about my own experience of membership of the group. The general format means that artists who work often for long periods in isolated

circumstances or without much contact with other artists have an opportunity to discuss their work and more general artistic topics with people with similar interests and practices, therefore giving the artist the opportunity that might not otherwise be available to them in general day-to-day art practice," he said.

"Within the structure of the group there may be opportunity for artists to interact and perhaps collaborate in a more personal basis, and also to encourage and support each other," Paul said.

In the picture on illustration

Illustrator Dubliner Jennifer Farley moved to Westmeath about 16 years ago and has been drawn into an array of fascinating projects since then.

“My first route into visual art was actually through photography. I started taking pictures at a young age because my dad was a keen photographer and we used to process the prints at home in my brother’s bedroom,” said Jennifer who lives in Clonmellon.

“‘Island of Adventures’ is the first picture book I have written and illustrated. The idea behind it was that it was an illustrated guidebook of some of the amazing things we can do around Ireland from scuba diving a shipwreck to kayaking

at night through a lake filled with effervescent bubbles,” said Jennifer.

“Since the book was published by O’Brien Press, a lot of people have told me they didn’t realise all of the cool activities that happen around the country,” she said.

“I have previously illustrated three other books with three different authors.”

Astronaut

Jennifer is currently illustrating a book written by Dr. Norah Patten who it is hoped will be Ireland’s

first astronaut. It will hit the shelves in September. As an illustrator, Jennifer also draws lots of maps and also teaches design and Photoshop.

She is one half of a creative couple. Husband Jason Robards makes greenwood chairs. He has exhibited his chairs at the Listoke Gallery near Dundalk; the Cill Rialag arts centre in Kerry and the Black Raven gallery, Delvin.

More information on Jennifer is on: www.jenfarley.com For additional details on Jason’s work, see: www.hedgerow-crafts.com



The Shambles:

‘A model for practical collaboration to support creative endeavour’

By Ann McGuinness



The Shambles art studios, named after their location in the historic butchers’ quarter in Athlone, have been a workspace to a number of artists from the region and has been artist-led for the past six years. Most of the artists had previously availed of space in the Abbey Road studios, Athlone, operated under the auspices of the Luan Gallery and Westmeath County Council.

The aim was to take the benefits of individual studio practice and collaborative working further on a more lasting basis. Suitable premises became available, and with the generous facilitation of the owner, it provides six individual studio spaces for the artists; common areas of a kitchen and bathroom and a small gallery space for exhibitions.

Coming together in this way, and committed to an artist-led approach, made it easier for the group to manage and share the practical realities of renting and insuring the premises, dealing with day-to day management of the common areas and arranging and hanging exhibitions.

Individual strengths are drawn on to support solo and group exhibitions, funding applications and interaction with public authorities and other artists and groups in the region. The core group of artists has remained in place but some sharing of workspace has allowed a small number of other artists to benefit from the studios. It is also the practice, when group exhibitions take place, to invite one or more local, and on occasion, international artists to participate.

Cultural Asset

The studios occupy the upper floor of a two-storey town house in a busy riverside area of Athlone,

close to the Luan Gallery and Dean Crowe Theatre. This is considered to be the cultural quarter of Athlone. The studios are an integral part of this area and the artists, individually and collectively, participate in various events.

The scope of creative activity is extensive, with artists working in painting, photography and sculpture across a range of styles and forms. A key aim is to make the work accessible. The studios are open to all annually on Culture Night when the artists show work in progress in the workspace and exhibit new and experimental work.

Individual members have exhibited locally and regionally while smaller groups of members come together to exhibit in the studios and at other local venues.

Artists Lesley Wingfield; Ann McGuinness and Catherine Rock exhibited in the Dean Crowe Theatre during the 2018 RTE All-Ireland Drama Festival and have been allocated space in the atrium of the Athlone Civic Centre for an exhibition at the end of 2019. Artist Mark Grehan has exhibited internationally and had a solo show in the studio gallery.

Photographer Veronica Nicholson was commissioned by Offaly County Council to

produce the ‘Observing Offaly’ photo book in 2016, and her exhibition ‘36 Views of Croghan Hill’ showed in Áras an Chontae, Tullamore, in May. Three of the Shambles artists – Lawrence O’Neill, Margo McNulty and Catherine Rock – have had solo exhibitions in the Luan Gallery.

Residencies

Lesley Wingfield and Veronica Nicholson both operate a studio practice that extends into the community in the form of workshops; collaborations; classes and community-based projects. Artists have also availed of residencies in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre.

The Shambles art studios have provided a creative hub for the artists in residence. The studios give the artists continuity of tenure, the motivation generated by a shared interest as well as relief from flagging inspiration provided by sociable interludes.

The group originally came together with the common purpose of being an independent, artist-led studio practice. This has worked very successfully. At the same time, every artist has the security of individual studio space to pursue creative projects, both within and outside the studios. The Shambles art studios provide a model for practical collaboration to support creative endeavour.

Edenderry day care film project is the 'reel' thing

Broadcaster, producer and filmmaker Ann Marie Kelly spent multiple weekly sessions with a group of day care residents at Ofalia House, Edenderry, Co. Offaly, in conjunction with Anam Beo. Ann Marie has worked in radio for over 20 years and her love of documentary recently won her two gold national IMRO radio awards for interviewing people.

Her intention with the series of short films 'Love Life Lessons' based in Edenderry was to capture on film and sound a specific aspect of an older person's life. Whether living with loneliness, dementia or physical illness, a series of questions was centred around 'life and love lessons' for the viewer or listener.

A gentle approach allowed space for the resident to feel comfortable with her. The pieces to microphone and camera were conversational and most times the resident forgot the presence of any recording devices, Ann Marie said.

"When that happened, the resident allowed themselves to go right back in time. This process allowed them to go back so as to move forward. Intentionally I knew none of their history so this allowed me to be a spectator as well as an interviewer with no intention to lead the interview, but merely guide it," she said.

Magic

'When this natural conversation occurred, and it happened frequently, it was magic.

In one example, a man dealing with his wife's death after caring for her for many years speaks unprompted and uninterrupted. His expression of love for her is heartfelt and he now wants to tell the world how much he loved her," Ann Marie said.

"Alongside this expression of love, it also allowed him to admit how difficult it was to care for someone when they are so unwell. He, now unwell himself, realises the importance in a recording of it so it can be seen by many as an example of his true devotion to her. He expressed after the interview how cathartic it was for him to be given the opportunity to put on tape his love for her after all the hardship," she said.

'In a similar cathartic moment for a resident, I prompted a lady to remember her time working as a barmaid in 1960s London. She was able to relive moments in the buzzing Irish bar filled with music, song and sadness when she acted not just as barmaid but as a counsellor for the many lonely young Irish men who were drinking their loneliness away," Ann Marie recounted.

"By allowing her to relive that time at length, she was able to recall a huge amount of memory that she had thought she had forgotten. She also said afterwards she realised how much she had helped 'those poor young lost Irish souls'," said Ann Marie.

There are many examples of this cathartic process in the 'Love Life' series where the residents have no idea of the importance of their story or what life lessons can be passed onto the next generation. Their sage words can indeed be passed on and archived.

Well rounded exhibition

Artist Willie Redmond's exhibition titled, 'Fifty Rounds Odd' ran throughout the month of July at The Atrium, Áras an Chontae, Tullamore.

The exhibition of round paintings was based on inland waterways from canals, bogpools and ditches. The artist spent his childhood fishing and walking these midland waters and that relationship is the constant master and source. The paintings create a sense of walking and watching, journey and observation.

The exhibition created a focal feeling on the subject matter acting as contemplation zones that engages memory spaces. Highly detailed with draughtsmanship and composition to the fore, mood and seasons

are expressed, sky is reflected on water through diverse plant-life.

Depth was created through layers that change with light. It is the universal in the local, life and abstraction at the water's edge. Looking down, the reflection changed through every narrative.

Narrative was applied as every painting has two segments that create balance, movement, contrast and journey; for example, raindrops on the water in one segment, is juxtaposed to the still waters in the other segment to create this effect.

Location was not highlighted, an everywhere and nowhere projection, hence the memory space sensation.

For further information on the artist's work see: www.willieredmond.com





‘Free Market’ to visit Mountmellick as role of ‘The Square’ probed

An exhibition from the Irish pavilion at the 16th international architecture exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia 2018 – will visit Mountmellick, Co. Laois, from September 5 to 8 as part of its tour to four market towns

‘Free Market’ won acclaim for its exploration of the unique identity of Irish rural towns when it showed in Venice. This ambitious exhibition is now being brought to four towns as part of its national tour. The vital role that market places play in the life of rural communities will be celebrated and explored with local communities.

Curated by a team of six architects and designers, ‘Free Market’ aims to reassert the declining rural market square as a public place of social, political and cultural exchange, central to community cohesion.

Once the economic and social hubs of rural Ireland, many market squares in these towns have seen their function as a place for exchange and congregation diminished. Others have surrendered their role as markets and are now used only for car parking.

‘Free Market’ first launched in Venice in May 2018 as the Irish national pavilion at La Biennale Architettura, where it occupied a large area in the Arsenale as a space for exchange for six months. In November 2018, the pavilion and exhibition were shipped back to Ireland.

The curatorial team have prepared an evolved design of the pavilion which will be bespoke for all four towns, landing in public spaces, inhabiting vacant spaces, coinciding with festivals and market days.

“From the outset, it was important to us that the national tour would bring the pavilion and the conversation around it back to small market towns”, the curators said. “A key aim of the pavilion is to provoke conversation and ideas about the future of towns and to listen and collect information, thoughts, ideas and dreams for towns, as we tour.”



Inaugural Twin Trees Festival for Ballinakill

The inaugural Twin Trees Heywood Art and Culture Festival will be held in Ballinakill, Co. Laois, from August 22 to 25. It is taking place in celebration of the 150th birthday of Sir Edwin Lutyens, renowned architect and creator of the exquisite formal garden at Heywood, set against the backdrop of the gardens, the surrounding woodlands and the village of Ballinakill.

Guests will enjoy garden tours and talks; a musical evening; outdoor painting and yoga. Dr Matthew Jebb, the renowned Irish botanist and director of the National Botanic Gardens, will give a talk. There will also be the opportunity to learn of the Lutyens collaboration with Gertrude Jekyll who landscaped the garden at Heywood. An ‘En Plein Air’ outdoor painting event, tutored by established artists Jock Nichol and Bridget Flannery, will take place over three days.

Saturday 24 promises to be a great celebration with numerous events, including a musical evening hosted on the lawn. The following morning, again utilising the wonderful setting of Lutyens’ creation, there will be yoga in the garden, tutored by Simon Rodgers of Blackhill Woods Retreat.

LANESBORO PIANIST performs in concert series

Peter Regan, virtuoso pianist, graced the main stage of the National Concert Hall in March when he took on the dazzling Prokofiev Concerto No 3.

Peter performed with the celebrated Hibernian Orchestra, under the baton of renowned conductor and RTE National Symphony Orchestra member, John Finucane, in their spring gala concert.

Ballyleague-born pianist Peter has been studying at the prestigious Royal College of Music in London and will perform in Cork, Dublin and Galway later this summer, and finish up with a performance in Longford’s Backstage Theatre in December. Talented Peter will also perform a series of concerts in Spain and London.



Teaching Longford children the language of theatre

By Jessica Thompson

Artist residencies are all about supporting the artist and enabling them to create the work they want to achieve. However, Backstage Theatre's new artist-in-residence Maisie Lee is all about helping children to create.



With the help of actor and playwright Fionnuala Gygax, Maisie is working on a project 'Luminaria', giving children the chance to have their say on how the performance should look.

"Fionnuala and I are interested in making work for young people that involves them in the process, so it's not just us deciding what will work really well for the children; their ideas actually feed into the development process," Maisie explained.

"This play is a window into the creative process from the beginning of an idea to seeing something on stage. I think quite often children might get a bit of that - either putting on a play or writing a story - but actually to get to follow the journey through is very useful."

Valid

It's an idea that is quite new in Ireland, teaching children the language of theatre and showing them that their input as children is as valid as adults.

General manager of the Backstage Theatre Mona Considine is thrilled to be bringing such an inspiring project to Longford through the artist-in-residence programme.

"To have that insight into the children's interpretation of the work or reaction to the work or response to the work is really interesting to see. I think it's great that they're involved in some way in the making of the professional work for their own age group, however small that is," she said.

It's a relatively new idea in terms of making work for children's audiences and young audiences and involving the children in the process, according to Maisie.

"I think that's the most important thing about this residency; the children being involved in the process, not just being expected to turn up as an audience member. They're there from the beginning and they feel an ownership of the work."

Youth Theatre Ireland announces bursary in memory of Siobhán Coffey

'Everyone had a role to play'

Youth Theatre Ireland has announced a bursary in recognition of the work done by the late Siobhán Coffey, Stradbally. The Siobhán Coffey memorial bursary award funded the entire cost of attendance of a leader at its 'Leading On' training in June. It will be in place for three years.

"Siobhán was a constant presence at this training and the staff felt that this would be an appropriate way of marking her contribution to youth theatre," said Eoghan Doyle, Youth Theatre Ireland.

Siobhán started with Laois Youth Theatre in 2005 as an assistant youth theatre tutor and progressed to take the role of youth theatre co-ordinator for Stradbally Youth Theatre after a short number of years.

She went on to direct youth theatre groups in Mountrath as well as directing two main groups in Portlaoise until she retired in 2018 due to ill health.

Outstanding Guidance

Some of the plays produced were specially devised or improvised by the young actors under her outstanding guidance. Siobhán will be fondly remembered for bringing a sense of enjoyment to the weekly workshops and to the production of plays where no-one felt excluded or sidelined.

She allowed the group to grow in confidence in a natural way, giving the young people challenges but understanding that some members needed time to develop their performance ability and

confidence. And everyone had a role to play.

In his moving eulogy, her brother Adrian painted a picture of Siobhán's devotion to her family; her love of the arts from an early age; and her work in unleashing the potential of young people.

Siobhán was a key member of the Laois arts office team and her spirit and her work will never be forgotten. Her love of art extended to her great joy in being involved in the Stradbally visual arts project 'Townscape', led by renowned artist Mary Burke. Mary visited 12 homes in Stradbally to capture and paint a scene from all of the houses and Siobhán and her husband Sean, really enjoyed being a part of it.

Flash-Mobs

Saoirse Anton, assistant tutor with Laois Youth Theatre said it was hard to capture a tribute to Siobhán in just a couple of lines, remarking that she will be missed more than she could summarise. "Even though she was never directly my youth theatre leader in Portlaoise Youth Theatre, I have so many memories of productions; parades; flash-mobs, and youth theatre trips around the country.

"I'll always remember her smile, a smile that said



Photo: Youth Theatre Ireland.

– we're making something, we're in it together, and we're having the best time. Now that I'm a facilitator myself, I feel that if I can bring even half the energy of that smile to the groups I work with, then I'll have done a good job. "

Legacy

Siobhán directed numerous plays with different groups over the years, the majority performed at the Dunamais Arts Centre. Performing at the Dunamais gave Siobhán the opportunity to introduce the young actors to all the elements of working in a professional theatre space and with professional theatre staff.

Laois arts officer Muireann Ní Chonaill, said that Siobhán left a wonderful legacy. "She generated love and passion for all things theatre among the members of Laois Youth Theatre. Her infectious good humour and can-do attitude are my abiding memory of this very special person. We in the Laois arts office miss Siobhán greatly but are comforted that the seeds she planted are bearing fruit, with the Laois Youth Theatre strengthened by her guidance. Laoch ar lár. Ní bheidh a léithead ann arís."



Tullamore artist on 'An altered land'

Artist David Fox, a native of Tullamore, recently held a solo exhibition 'An Altered Land', at the Olivier Cornet Gallery, Dublin. Since graduating from Belfast School of Art in 2013, David has been working extensively on his painting practice, mostly focusing on creating a series of Irish urban landscape paintings.

His wider practice comprises paintings that depict everyday settings that are strangely familiar to us all and remind us of common ventures. His paintings feature a series of subdued landscapes, including motorway and road settings, and then other urban landscapes that capture a sense of the ordinary, as depicted by what has been hailed an 'extraordinary' painting style.

His loose atmospheric 'other world'-like paintings display a sense of the unknown, with a stark emptiness that works to create uncanny impressions of every scene that he sets. Having graduated from Galway's School of Art in 2011 where he received an honours degree in fine art painting, he got his master's degree in fine art from Belfast's School of Art.

David now lives and works in Dublin and has had recent and ongoing participation in both group and solo exhibitions. This was his second major Irish solo exhibition. He has also exhibited internationally, having had three solo exhibitions in Madrid to date, and a group exhibition in Madrid at Galeria Silvestre, in May.

Human Construction

'An Altered land' comprised a series of subdued landscapes demonstrating how manmade constructs have left an indelible mark on our natural world. David sought to push further the notion of human construction, by focusing attention on these fabricated objects or structures that tend to cut through the land and 'obstruct the natural world.'

David contended that landscapes have increasingly become more than a place touched by human presence. They have become somewhat unnatural.

He documented enticing scenes as witnessed first-hand during his day-to-day activities. Viewers gained insight to his 'everyday' lifestyle, as settings depicted the surroundings of his professional life and leisure time. In 'An Altered Land', a sense of place was predominant. Visitors to the gallery witnessed scenes of empty motorways; countryside roads; rural landscapes and other works of topography. Every painting held a personal narrative and at the very core, a

documentation of the artist's daily life.

Barriers

While living in Belfast, David worked on paintings of the well known peace walls and other social or political 'barriers' that are still maintained and divide local communities. During this time, he was working part-time as a driver and daily trekked from one side of the city to the other, gaining insight to the back streets.

He travelled back and forth from his hometown of Tullamore, inspiring some of the desolate motorway and road scenes. Also frequently travelling across the border, he began documenting various border crossings. These works intended on highlighting the vulnerability of an intangible frontier now challenged by an uncertain future. As is also evident in these paintings, the artist has a love of the great outdoors. He often spends downtime exploring rural Ireland, hiking mountains; going on country walks and soaking up the serenity of the landscape.

Much Ado About Backstage

It's all heating up at Backstage Theatre, Longford, as it prepares for a busy line-up of events that will keep audiences entertained through to Christmas.

Internationally renowned choreographer and Longford native Marguerite Donlon curates the 'Step Up' dance programme with Dance Limerick which will showcase in Backstage at the end of August.

Bell X1 front man Paul Noonan kicks off the autumn season with a much anticipated solo gig that is already selling fast. Master guitarist and country music personality Ciarán Rosney pays tribute to a music legend 'Gentle on My Mind, The Glen Campbell Story' accompanied by a five-piece band.

In keeping with musical nostalgia, there will be an all-singing all-dancing Abba tribute in December and hits of the '70s and '80s from Gina and the Champions. Longford favourites Mick Flavin and pianist Peter Regan will also take to the stage.

Fresh from his performance as Billy Murphy in the TV series and movie 'The Young Offenders', Shane Casey brings his comedy 'Wet Paint.' Inspired by his time as a painter decorator, Shane

Casey's play depicts a day-in-the-life of two Cork painters and their boss during the Celtic Tiger era, when anything was possible, at least inside your head.

Best-selling Westmeath author of 'When All Is Said,' Anne Griffen, will appear as part of the One Book series with Words Ireland.

There's plenty in store for kids with a packed programme of theatre. Backstage's 'Playmaking' project with artist-in-residence Maisie Lee, supported by Arts Council Ireland, Creative Ireland and Longford County Council, is in full swing with participants busily working on their plays that will appear on stage during Aisling Children's Festival.

Coisceim Dance Theatre is back with a feast for the senses and 'The Dig' will bring little ones on an adventure of bones and mystery with a fascinating archaeologist.

Schools will be treated to performances from leading children's theatre companies, Barnstorm's

production 'The Bockety World of Henry and Bucket' and Branar Theatre's production of 'Twas the Night Before Christmas.'

Ballet Ireland return with 'Swan Lake', combining romantic themes, classical technique and ethereal imagery with Tchaikovsky's majestic score. This autumn 25 leading professional dancers from Ireland and abroad will perform in this production.

One of the highlights of the autumn season is the return of Rough Magic Theatre company with Shakespeare's comedy of rumour, romance, and a fuss over a trifle, in this production of 'Much Ado About Nothing' like you've never seen it before.

In this absurd exuberant and funny piece of theatre, Rough Magic's 'Much Ado About Nothing' asks: can we ever truly know the people we love? Complete with a 30-piece choir, this is one not to miss.

Further details and tickets are available on: 043-33 47888 or: backstage.ie



Mullingar actor has sights set on Hollywood

Mullingar actor Niamh Algar is continuing her huge success story, recently making the cut in Elle magazine's '50 gamechangers of now.'

Niamh Algar nailed the first audition she went for, winning the main role of Dinah, a fiery down and out couch surfer, in 'This Is England' creator Shane Meadows' new Channel 4 series 'The Virtues', Elle noted.

Growing up in the Mullingar countryside as the youngest of five children, Niamh used her love of theatre to assert her individuality in a household of sports-obsessed triathletes, Elle said.

Boxing

Niamh recalled how she loved the idea of making her parents laugh and entertaining them.

Landing a lead role in the writer-director Shane Meadows TV series was a dream come true, she told The Guardian. She said she is a major fan of Shane's work.

Niamh recalled how when she was 15, one of the first DVDs she took from her older brothers was 'This is England.' "I'd never seen anything

like it. It was a different beast to Dawson's Creek or the romcoms I'd been watching. Shane's a genius, so to be auditioning for him, let alone get the part, was mindblowing," she said in The Guardian.

That part was opposite Stephen Graham. They played Dinah and Joseph, two lost souls who met when Joseph confronted a difficult childhood, growing up in care.

Studied

Niamh fulfilled another ambition in co-starring with Graham, she told The Guardian. "When I studied drama at the Factory in Dublin, we used to workshop scenes between Combo and Lol from 'This Is England.' So suddenly to be working opposite Steve was amazing."

Niamh also starred in Channel 4's 'Pure' about an extreme form of OCD called "pure O". After last year's role in Desiree Akhavan's 'The Bisexual,' 'Pure' was her second gay character in a row.

Niamh also played an army veteran in the BBC2 thriller 'MotherFatherSon' starring Richard Gere.

After a slew of successful roles, she reportedly has her sights set on Hollywood.





'Dialogues, painting the portrait from life'

Artist Una Sealy RHA hosted portraiture workshops 'Painting the portrait from life' at Laois Arthouse for the annual summer arts programme for adults in June.



Based in north county Dublin, Una paints domestic interiors; streetscapes; landscape and portraiture. She paints from observation and often the compositions evolve organically, with elements appearing and disappearing before the final arrangement is reached. The works form a kind of visual autobiography.

In the two-day workshops, Una led the participants through the process of painting a portrait from life, from planning the composition, through tonal under painting, to completed painting.

Exhibition

An exhibition of Una's portraits is displayed in Laois Arthouse gallery. It showcases a personal selection of works depicting friends and family, shown together for the first time. The exhibition was opened by Sinéad Ó Reilly, head of local arts and participation at the Arts Council of Ireland.

Una spends varying amounts of time with her sitters, from a single three-hour sitting to longer term projects requiring multiple sessions. This connection

between artist and sitter is important to her, as the resulting conversations inform the work, and contribute to a certain fluidity in the paint handling. The aim is that the resulting work somehow encapsulates time passing, as opposed to one static moment.

The workshop participants included: Agnes Devlin; Ann Bates; Pauline Conroy; Teresa Gammell; Rowena Cunningham; Jen Donnery; Ian Mc Donagh; Mike Rafter; Genevive Murphy; Claire Murphy; Padraig Ó Flannabhra; Aisling Coughlan; Antoinette Breen; Marian Phelan; Maria Ó Brien; Jim Campion; Rossa Ó Dufaiigh and Mary Slevin. A selection of their work can be seen in the lobby of the Arthouse.

The sitters were Ustina Maximova and Debbie Perkins. The exhibition runs until September 5.

Una was interviewed about the 'Dialogues' exhibition at Laois Arthouse and her experience there on 'Arena' on RTE Radio One on June 25.

Almost 600 local photographers submitted images to the first Longford Landscapes competition.

There were even some entries from outside the country, according to judge, Shelley Corcoran. Several people who had visited Longford and taken photographs decided to enter the competition.

"The standard was extremely high, we had such a difficult job getting it down to just 31 finalists," she said.

"The fact that we got entries from abroad also shows that Longford is a county that is photogenic, has beautiful landscapes, has interesting townscapes. Visitors see how wonderful it is and they want to photograph it.

"We know that places such as Donegal; Galway; Kerry and Waterford are all so scenic but now this competition has proved and shown that Longford can join these counties with scenery and townscapes worth being photographed.

Book

"Entries were from all ages which again shows that Longford is viewed as a place that has something for everyone. The standard of

photography was so high that a book is now in the pipeline."

The photographic book, according to county arts officer Fergus Kennedy, will be a coffee-table style publication that works as promotional material for the county, showcasing the very best Longford has to offer.

Competition judge councillor Peggy Nolan congratulated all of the finalists on making it to the exhibition and expressed her delight that almost 600 entries were received.

"Over the years, I have seen so much fantastic work done by non-professionals and I think tonight is a time to say thank you to all of you that can go out in our beloved county and take pictures that are there for posterity," she said.

"It's not just going to end here because the main concept was that when this competition was over, we would go back to our arts officer and get the funding to put all of them in a book with the names and maybe even a little story, to have those forever."

Light

Cathaoirleach of Longford Municipal District councillor Seamus Butler also congratulated all of the photographers present.

"The light is different in the midlands than it is in the west. It's particular to the midlands in that the landscape is flatter and there are some remarkable photographs here and all of you should be proud to be finalists," he said.

Lanesboro photographer Brigid Mullooly took first prize with a stunning image of a sunset over the jetty in Lanesboro.

"It's great to get people together with this interest," she said. An exhibition like the one on display at the courtyard should be on display elsewhere, she said.

"If you could do this exhibition in large and take it outdoors during the arts festival, I think it would be great for the county. We need to sell - especially with Center Parcs coming up - we just need to keep selling every other area - not only Ballymahon, but every other area in the county."



You Wear it well

Lizzy Brown (15) found an alternative use for old Junior Cert papers

Transition Year student in the Sacred Heart School, Tullamore, Lizzy Brown has always had a passion for fashion.

“So when the opportunity arose to take part in the Junk Kouture regional competition, I took it. Growing up I’ve always loved fashion. I had total freedom of my design and I got to express myself through my dress. I’m so happy and grateful I got to share this experience with my friends and family,” Lizzy said.

“At first I was hesitant to do the module because I didn’t feel I could design a whole dress made from recycled materials but I decided that I could do anything I put my mind to.

“I made my dress out of recycled Junior Cert papers; cereal boxes; cereal; plastic spoons; cardboard boxes and tea cups. After spending months designing and making the dress, our school held a fashion show to showcase all the Junk Kouture dresses made before the regional vote took place,” she said.

Insta Success

“I made an Instagram account for my dress to raise awareness and gain votes. After waiting for a couple of weeks for the results of the regional vote, I got the news that I got through,” Lizzie said.

“At this stage I was preparing for competition day. I was so nervous. The minute check in was done I was given instructions to start make up and only had 45 minutes to do so.

“At first I got glue in my eyes so that caused my face paint and make up to run. Then I found out that I forgot my eyelashes. I looked in the mirror and said to myself: ‘Just have fun’, “ Lizzy said.

“Soon after I was called for dress rehearsal. I was so excited to be on the big stage. When it came to my turn to do sound check the production was having difficulties loading my music from the USB stick I handed in,” she recalled.

This meant she had to learn a new routine in under two hours. “I started thinking what if I forget my new routine or what if I froze on stage in front of thousands of people,” Lizzy admitted.

However, she remembered a saying of her mother’s: ‘God wouldn’t put you through anything you couldn’t handle.’ That lifted her spirits. “I got on stage and I gave it my all,” she said.

Concept

“Unfortunately I didn’t place in the semi-finals; only eleven got through to the final but I was very happy I got as far as the regionals. Before the competition began, the judges spoke to us about our dresses. One said that they loved the concept and design and that I looked like a pink tinkler bell. This made me smile and gave me a bit more confidence.

“Junk Kouture was one of my best memories from this past year. I met so many new people and learned time management and patience – two main things you need if you want to enter the competition.”



Laois libraries' Lego animation studio builds on success



Thomas with the president of the Library Association of Ireland, Marian Higgins.
Photo: Valerie Madden.

Now in its second year, the Laois libraries' Lego animation studio is again celebrating after Thomas Maher of Abbeyleix library received the inaugural Library Association of Ireland (LAI) library staff champion award in March.

The award acknowledges exceptional staff who make a real difference to the lives of library users, be it through information literacy initiatives, technological developments, library design or strategic development.

Thomas was the driving force behind the Laois libraries' Lego animation studios which also won the LAI public libraries' section project prize in 2017.

The project allows participants to draw on both their technical and creative sides, with groups working together to plan, script, shoot, voice over and produce their own Lego movies.

Aimed at encouraging older children and young adults to make use of their libraries, the studio was also able to hold a screening

of all nine of their short movies made by over 70 young people from across Laois and into Kilkenny, in the Dunamase arts centre in October 2018, thanks to the support of county librarian Bernie Foran and the Laois library services.

The impact it has had on the young people involved has been immeasurable; the library became their space and allowed them the opportunity to assert themselves, strengthening their self-confidence.

Since the initial run of the project, many involved have gone on to create their own short films, comic strips, short stories and various creative projects. Thomas, together with Lori Moriarty of Durrow library, hopes to see the project go nationwide in the future.

Energy Plus School of Dance celebrates 30 years in Mullingar

It has been an exceptionally busy season at Energy Plus School of Dance which this year celebrates 30 years of dance in Mullingar. Students have worked incredibly hard and achieved fantastic results through this special season, said Anne-Marie Bentick, principal.



The school teaches ballet; tap; modern; jazz; acro; hip hop; contemporary and musical theatre. Students are trained for examination, competition and show work.

“Our students have been involved in Culture Night; a Christmas show; ‘SEUSSICAL’ the musical and the end of year show ‘Dancing Feet 2019,’” Anne-Marie said.

“They have competed in freestyle competition and dance festivals against competitors across Ireland, north and south. They have achieved exceptional results including highest marks for many categories as well as highest overall mark for ABD Northern Ireland festival for Niamh O’Reilly and highest overall mark for southern Ireland festival for Kian Newcombe.

“We also won the teachers’ shield for the highest points achieved over our two-day southern Ireland festival,” said Anne-Marie.

Sixty students took their grade examinations in May, a total of 120 examinations, and again maintained Energy Plus’ 100 per cent pass rate over 30 years of annual examination entries, she said.

“This season we have seen our very own Megan Carton perform Demeter in ‘Cats’, the musical, to huge audiences aboard ‘Oasis of the Seas’ Royal Caribbean while on an eight-month contract.

Catherine Healy is heading to London to continue her training, having secured a place at the London Studio Centre on its musical theatre degree course. Meanwhile, Anusha Smullen has achieved a position in the junior ensemble Irish National Youth Ballet.

“Students learn how to enjoy working hard and the satisfaction that brings. However, it’s not all about winning competitions or results. It’s about doing your best, whatever that may be, and knowing that your hard work is helping you in so many ways,” said Anne-Marie.

Achievement

Dance, she outlined, teaches children so much more than steps and routines. “It teaches determination; patience; concentration; discipline; respect; consideration and teamwork. It links hard work with achievement, a lesson that helps them in all aspects of life and the confidence that comes

with that achievement,” said Anne-Marie.

“Most importantly it gives them something that they love. The studio becomes a second home and their fellow students, other students’ parents and their dance teachers are their family. They look out for each other; they coach each other and they get each other through endless backstage dramas. They actually pick each other up when it goes wrong and they laugh, they laugh a lot,” she said.

“In this year’s show we were delighted to see some of our students return to perform. They are finished college and are back at dance class every week and it feels like they never left us,” she said.

“We also have so many past students bringing their own children. Some were in the very first classes at the community centre 30 years ago. I think we may have a troupe for the mum’s next year,” said Anne-Marie.

Energy Plus, a registered school with Associated Board of Dance, at 5, Brosna Business Park, Lynn Road, Mullingar, can be contacted on: 086-2375910.

Cinematic culture comes to south Longford

Longford Summer Festival and Ballymahon Music Festival and the ever popular Cruthú Arts Festival kicked off summer frolics in the county.

August will keep up that level of entertainment as the StillVoices Short Film Festival returns to Ballymahon from August 15 to 18 for a weekend featuring the very best of local, national and international film talent.

The committee of StillVoices Short Film Festival was delighted to announce the official selection for the 2019 festival.

“We were blown away once again by the quality of film we received from across the world,” said chairperson of the committee, Ronan O’Toole.

“Our selection committee had a tough time whittling it down from 515 films to just over 100.”

There will be some cinematic gems screening in Ballymahon over the weekend, including ‘The Neighbour’s Window’, the first fiction film from three-time Academy Award nominee Marshall Curry.

Also in this year’s film selection is the 2019 Bafta-winning documentary, ‘73 Cows’ by Alex Lockwood, while on the Irish front, the Academy Award nominated film ‘Detainment’ by Vincent Lambe will really impress the crowds.

“Local filmmakers are well represented again this year thanks to the Made in the Midlands programme, with films from Offaly, Westmeath and of course Longford with Patrick McGivney and Robert Higgins’ film ‘Angels Guard Thee’ screening over the weekend,” said Ronan.

To keep up to date on what’s to come during StillVoices Short Film Festival, see @StillVoicesFilmFestival on Facebook and Instagram or @SVFilmFest on Twitter.

More information can also be found at: stillvoicesfilmfestival.com.

Westmeath short order

Still Voices Short Film Festival, in partnership with Westmeath County Council and Creative Ireland, hosted a screening of short films in the Council buildings, Mullingar, on June 21.

The films included 2018 Still Voices Short Film Festival award winners and a preview of the 2019 programme.

Local filmmaker Noel McIntyre’s short documentary on Mullingar-based wood-carver Richie Clarke closed out the night.

The films screening included: 2018 Still Voices Short Film Festival award winners: best Irish film: ‘Late Afternoon,’ directed by Louise Bagnall; best international film: ‘Wren Boys’ directed by Harry Lighton; best non-fiction film: ‘I’m Free’ directed by Edvard Karijord and Bendik Mondal; best animated film: ‘Wicked Girl’ directed by Ayce Kartal; two films from local filmmakers: 2018 Made in the Midlands Selection: ‘Bungalow Bliss’ directed by Adrian Duncan; and 2019 Made in the Midlands Selection: ‘I Created You,’ directed by Noel McIntyre.



'Creating work in the midlands for midlands audiences'

Live music, puppetry, an ensemble for narrators and a teddy bear called Marty

Offaly-based Beluga Theatre Company is in full preparation mode for its new production 'Marty Moncrieff and the Teddy Bear Thief', suitable for audiences aged four years and over. The show which was part of the Galway Theatre Festival, is set to be performed around the country including Beluga's home of Offaly.

It tells the tale of a teddy called Marty who is a world infamous thief, snatching everything from fast cars to cookie jars. However, there is a new sheriff in town, who is hot on the fluffy heels of the teddy bear thief.

After very encouraging experiences with children's arts organisations, Offaly native Oisín Robbins set up Beluga Theatre and worked on this new play.

"The show is an important part of the national children's arts scene. It was the only full production in the Galway Theatre festival written for young audiences and the fact that it is set in rural Ireland makes it more special," he said.

"It is vital to give children access to engaging theatre and we are trying to make these

connections and experiences with this show. I've seen the impact shows from Baboró's Childrens Festival last year and it highlights how important it is to bring children to theatre," Oisín said.

"I still have very fond and vivid memories of the rare occasions I saw shows as a child and I really want to create experiences like these for children and their families and friends with this show. I am also very enthusiastic about creating work that is made in the midlands for midlands audiences and am motivated to represent a midlands organisation further afield," he said.

This playful theatrical and ultimately heart-warming tale is set in a world where Toy Story meets Father Ted and laughter, adventure and friendship is plentiful.

'Marty Moncrieff, The Teddy Bear Thief is supported by Offaly Arts Office and is coming to Offaly audiences soon. It is hoped that the show will feature during 'Hullabaloo!' Offaly's children's arts festival during the October midterm.



Lighten up

'Vintage Luminaries' returns to Birr

By Caroline Conway

Following their remarkable success last year, Birr Vintage Week will again be hosting 'Vintage Luminaries' presented by Offline Film Festival, from August 2 to 8. 'Vintage Luminaries' brings heritage to life through immersive video mapped illuminations onto selected buildings, redefining, rediscovering and expanding local social life and meaning of place.

What makes 'Vintage Luminaries' so different from the proliferation of light festivals around the world? We are a small midland town and cannot compete with the huge budget city events but we have something unique in Birr, which is the technical expertise and vision of Offline Film Festival and a vibrant community of artists who share a pride in our town and its cultural identity. We will be presenting an event that is based on local and embedded knowledge that provides authentic experiences,

rooted in the community.

The visual arts trail will be considerably smaller this year due to a lack of venues but we are introducing a public participation community window project that will run for the first two nights. It will see the night time streets between the luminary sites illuminated on a more domestic scale. To further transform the nocturnal landscape, our main exhibition 'Ghost Light' will have extended evening opening hours to be a part of the light trail.



With all these events we are shifting the night time focus of the festival to include cultural engagement in our public spaces. The illuminations are about ten minute cycles and run on continuous loops from 10pm. The audience is encouraged to wander through the streets engaging with both the installations and each other. Our goal is to lead to new ways of perceiving our buildings and

civic spaces at night, to create an atmosphere of discovery and magic for the community of locals and visitors that is totally different from the norm.

For light festival organisers, the keywords are: art; astonishment; surprise; poetry; emotion; exception and magic. The verbs are: gather together; share; participate and dream.'



Chain Reaction

In December 2018, Ursula Meehan responded to a callout from IACAT, the Irish Association of Creative Arts Therapists, for proposals from members to offer workshops at its first symposium in IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art) in April.

The theme of the symposium – ‘Unravel, Collaborate, Participate and Disrupt’ – immediately brought a memory to Ursula of the process of unknitting fine silver chains for her silversmith father. The finer, the more delicate the chain, the more difficult the process.

“As a child I learned the process of unravelling. It is a process embedded into memory. As an adult I can appreciate the spaces the process evokes. The words which come to mind are loosening; feeling into; pull apart; caught up; tension; discomfort; tracing back; observing; waiting and releasing, all relevant in a therapist’s vocabulary,” said Ursula, a visual artist and an art therapist with Luis na Greine Family Resource Centres counselling services who has a practice in participatory projects in community and arts and health sectors.

With this inspiration in mind Ursula called Úna Egan, a drama therapist also living in North Westmeath, and they decided to collaborate on a workshop based on Ursula’s childhood memory of unravelling. So began an exploration of how they could bring the two practices – art and drama – together to develop a workshop where participants could step into an evolving creative space. ‘Chain Reaction: Exploring the Energy of Unravelling’ was approved to be part

of the first symposium held by the IACAT, the representative body for professional art; drama; music and dance movement therapists in Ireland.

Arts therapies integrate the experience of a given art form with the theories and practice of psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry to create a unique form of therapeutic intervention. Seen as a young profession, the association’s vision is for creative arts therapies to be accessible, visible and valued as an integral part of health, education and social care systems in Ireland.

In April, Ursula and Úna delivered three 50-minute workshops in one of IMMA’s three studios used by the IACAT facilitators on the day. Working collectively, through metaphor, they guided participants through a series of creative experiences to explore and reflect on the energy, movement and change evoked by the process of unravelling. The cleared studio lent itself to being a place for interaction as Úna engaged participants in the theme through movement inspired by Augusto Boal’s ‘Circle of Knots’ exercise.

Mirroring Ursula’s initial response to the theme of unravelling, participants were invited to form a human chain, using colourful scarves as links. As

Úna led every group through a series of steps that encouraged it to play with, explore, and embody the energy of ravelling and unravelling, the movement was interwoven with opportunities for visual exploration and responses, facilitated by Ursula. The visual exploration/response was primarily focused on one central wall where the groups worked to capture their experience through art, collectively engaging in an act of unravelling; collaborating; participating and disrupting.

The symposium gave Ursula and Úna an opportunity to work together in the incredible setting of IMMA; to start a conversation about the role that the creative art therapies, as a means of creative engagement and exploration, can play in our community, and to engage participants from all walks of life in a conscious creative reflection on ‘unravelling’.

These are conversations and themes that Ursula and Úna would like to continue to explore during autumn in Fore, North Westmeath. Those interested should contact: Ursula Meehan via email: ursulamee@hotmail.com phone: 087-6885182, or Úna Egan who works in the community/education sector on: unaegan.dramatherapy@gmail.com, phone: 087-9626570.

St Joseph’s embroidery group keep the craft alive

Mountmellick embroidery originated in Mountmellick in Ireland in 1822, introduced by the Quakers and it is renowned the world over. The embroidery is described as matt white cotton thread used on heavy white cotton. The patterns used depict natural forms, especially the abundant flora of the area.

The Portlaoise group is in existence for over 23 years, with some of the original members still in attendance. The group is located in the Parish Centre, Portlaoise. There are 20 members at present, with classes

taking place on Mondays from 7.30 to 9.30pm.

Working with tutor Annie O’Brien, the group has hosted exhibitions and open nights and as a collective it recently completed work on a large tablecloth left unfinished by a deceased member that was exhibited at an event for Culture Night 2018, organised by the arts office.

As part of the Laois Bealtaine Festival in Laois, an exhibition and showcase of the craft took place at Laois Shopping Centre to allow people to see the work being created.

Social Aspect

The classes on Monday nights have a very important social aspect as members get to interact as they share tips and patterns as well as stories and jokes. Classes ran up to the end of May and then broke for the summer months, to resume in September.

The group welcomes new members who are interested in learning this age-old craft of Mountmellick embroidery and hope to keep the craft alive for future generations to enjoy.





Africa Day celebrated

‘One of most ethnically diverse towns’

Laois County Council, together with Laois Partnership Company and Laois African Support Group, hosted a packed programme of events to mark Africa Day from May 30 to June 1.

An initiative of the African Union, Africa Day celebrates African diversity and success and the cultural and economic potential of the continent. Laois County Council, together with Laois Partnership Company and Laois African Support Group, were among a number of organisations around the country supported by Irish Aid, the government's overseas aid programme, managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in hosting Africa Day events this year.

Peter O'Neill, chairperson of Laois Partnership Company, said that Portlaoise is one of the most ethnically diverse towns in Ireland, with 21% of the population non-Irish nationals.

“For Laois Partnership, this is an especially proud day. Through our integration service,

we facilitated the Laois African Support Group to form and to have the first Laois Africa Day in June last year. While this was a small event, Bolaji, chairperson of the Laois African Support Group saw the potential to grow this event,” he said.

The Laois Partnership Company chairman commended Portlaoise parish centre on receiving an award as a place of sanctuary and all involved in assisting with the organisation of Africa Day Laois.

Portlaoise was transformed by the sights, sounds and smells of Africa, as people gathered to celebrate. Laois African Support Group and Dunamais Art Centre, Portlaoise, collaborated to screen an African movie, ‘Queen Of Katwe.’

The film depicts the life of Phiona Mutesi, a Ugandan girl living in a slum in Katwe.

The main Africa Day Laois event took place in St Peter and Paul's Parish Centre, Portlaoise, with the Sounds of Africa featuring live music by well-known African and Irish musicians such as the Royal Vessel Gospel Choir. As part of Taste of Africa, guests were invited to sample a variety of foods from African countries.

Africa's rich culture was showcased through family-friendly activities, along with music, performances, sport and educational elements. There were also school visits; children's entertainment; traditional African drumming and dance workshops and African arts and crafts.

Westmeath project records field names



A working shot of the some of the group in Taughmon.

Field names are a valuable part of our local heritage and since many of them have not been formally recorded, they only survive in oral tradition, according to heritage officer Melanie McQuade.

“Our field names are being lost as land changes ownership and as members of the older generations pass on, so it is important to record as many as we can now,” she said.

Last year a pilot project was set up and community groups in Taughmon and Drumraney recorded hundreds of local field names.

This year groups in Collinstown, Fore and Multyfarnham are collecting field names in their areas.

The Westmeath field names recording project is being co-ordinated by Aengus Finnegan, a native of Glassan, with a PhD in placenames.

“Field names can tell us much about our local area – how people appreciated the physical landscape; its hills and hollows; streams and bogs; as well as its history and traditions, from holy wells, to fairy forts, old settlements, and estates”, said Aengus.

“The pronunciation and meanings of names

derived from Irish can also tell us about local dialects and the survival of the language in different areas. Among the interesting names recorded to date is one inspired by a famous battle in the Boer War.”

A Heritage Week event showcased working maps illustrating the field names recorded to date and people were invited to ‘fill in the gaps’ with any other names they knew. Several old photographs of people working in the fields also featured in the exhibition.

The project is being supported by the Heritage Council and Westmeath County Council. A booklet outlining the project and some of the results from 2018 is available from the heritage office, heritage@westmeathcoco.ie or 044-9332098.

For more information on the project contact the co-ordinator Aengus Finnegan: fieldnames@aengusfinnegan.ie or heritage officer Melanie McQuade: heritage@westmeathcoco.ie

36 Views of Croghan Hill

A photographic exhibition
by Veronica Nicholson



Croghan Hill, in North Offaly, is an extinct volcano, and is seen by many as a sacred mountain, having associations with both St Patrick and St Brigid. As the surrounding landscape is so flat it can be seen for miles, and is probably why it has played such an important role in Ireland for thousands of years.

'36 Views of Croghan Hill' is a series of photographs by Veronica Nicholson responding to Croghan Hill, depicting the surrounding peoples and landscapes in various seasons and weather conditions.

The idea for the series was inspired by the fact that Croghan Hill is visible from so many places around the county, which reminded Veronica of a famous set of woodblock prints from 19th

century Japan called '36 Views of Mount Fuji' by Hokusai, who completed the series when he was in his seventies.

Croghan Hill, like Mount Fuji, has been a place of pilgrimage for people for thousands of years, and this continues today. Hokusai has given us an enduring record of life in 19th century Japan; Nicholson's photographs have recorded for posterity a section of life in the 21st century in North Offaly.

'36 Views of Croghan Hill' was exhibited in Áras an Chontae, Tullamore in May.

The exhibition was funded by Offaly County Council's Creative Ireland programme 2019 and exhibition programme 2019.

Haikus

by Pauline McNamee

*Carboniferous
gasses disgorged from your core
Now, your presence soothes.*

*Pilgrims plot their route
from Scully's Lane, well, old school
To breathe your essence.*

*Bri eile, mother,
lover, sister, what secrets
lie within your womb?*

POETRY PAUSE

Poet; fiction writer; journalist and publisher Eileen Casey lives in South Dublin. Her poetry and prose collections are published by Arlen House; AltEnts and New Island. Her work also features in anthologies including those by Faber & Faber; Poetry Ireland; Dedalus; New Island and The Nordic Irish Studies Journal.

Eileen has been awarded many literary prizes including the Hennessy Emerging Fiction Award; A Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship; the Oliver Goldsmith Prize; and the Maria Edgeworth and Cecil Day Lewis Award. Her independent press, Fiery Arrow, won the 2017 CAP Awards, Carousel Creates, sponsored by Dubray Books and Eason.

A recently published response anthology to the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh features over 60 poets, together with the original Patrick Kavanagh poems, courtesy of The Jonathan Williams Literary Agency. 'Coloratura' and 'The Night Flower' – also included in Where Music Meets Art – are part of a larger suite of poems 'Sheet Music.' A new collection of poems is due out from Arlen House later this year.

Coloratura

Coloratura, by writer Eileen Casey, is part of Birr Theatre and Arts exhibition Where Music Meets Art, curated by Artist Emma Barone.

*Were this Drury Lane or Covent Garden
such window would be velvet draped
golden seats in tiers; orchestral flutes
blossoming bluebell sonatas. Clematis
octaves climb high in Killavilla.*

*Rumours are like rosin on the bow. At first light,
the Soprano in Carl Rosa's opera practices scales;
within hearing range of Marie, wife to Herbert. ★
Townsperson rest upon the stave, dressed in Sunday
best; threadbare coats, buttons shiny as brass.
Men's hats perch like ravens. Children's faces are pale
snowdrops after spring's bugle thaws star frosted melodies.
All await the songbird's gift.*

*Such a scene is over-shadowed by a soldier's fate,
his final act played out on a WW1 stage.*

Tales of Carl Rosa's Opera Company

★Herbert Charles, Second Lieutenant, Royal Field Artillery. 8th Unit, Ammunition Division. Killed in action, July 31, 1917, aged 33. Eldest son of Mr and Mrs Carl Rosa, founders of the Carl Rosa Opera Company, he married Marie O'Meara, Drumbane, Birr, Co. Offaly, eldest daughter of Mr William O'Meara. Herbert and Maria settled in Killavilla, Borrisokane, little dreaming what fate had in store.

The Night Flower

*If yours is a boring life, get out more,
meet people. Work as a theatre usher.
Go to concerts, recitals. Anywhere
people go to chat about anything
but the weather. Tell them about
your life, make a pitch, raise it
a cadenza or two, as if it were an opera.
Mozart's Magic Flute. You can (sing)
spiel Papagena or Pamina, depending
on your mood, give a virtuoso
performance. Command
an encore or two. A boring life
like Mirabilis Jalapa, darkens
into fascination, as an auditorium
brightens from the stage,
though itself in shadow.*

*Evening crawls towards midnight
Flat tunes exchange for silkier rhythms.
American smooth in a late night bar.*

*Play the jukebox, sip champagne
drink in all those hits recorded
in your heart. Scan the heavens
for blood red moons, concertos
clouding into your soul.*

*Be ready always to answer your door.
It might be the visitor from Porlock
accompanied by saxophone or violin;
come to shake you from your stupor.*

Laois Arthouse Collective develops valuable network



The newly formed Laois Arthouse Collective has been greeted with great enthusiasm. It provides an opportunity for emerging and professional artists to connect and express how they might develop their practice, both individually and as a group.

Increasing numbers of Laois-based artists have been meeting monthly with a view to gathering more frequently to participate in a variety of activities, such as plein air sessions, artists' café events and potential group exhibitions.

Future plans include inviting established artists to give talks. The range of resources and experience its members bring to the Laois Arthouse Collective will broaden the scope of opportunities and develop a valuable network for art practitioners in the midlands.

Maria O'Brien recently opened her studio for the collective. Members Aisling Hennessy and Allen Scully presented their work at an event in May.

For more information on the collective, contact: 057-8664033/13 or email: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie

PORTARLINGTON'S CARDEL produce new music video

Carla and Delwyn Mooney, aka Cardel, from Treascon, Portarlington, Co. Offaly, produced the new music video which starred British pop star James Blunt 'Walk Away.'

The music video was directed by Andzej Gavris for Alle Farben and James Blunt. It takes us into the world of a London taxi driver who secretly sketches his passengers. Then he meets a mysterious woman with a secret of her own.

It's an absorbing tale which brings an element of the otherworldly to an otherwise everyday setting. James Blunt makes a brief cameo as one of the cab driver's passengers.

Cardel is a full service award-winning production company headquartered in Ireland with a satellite office in London and Beirut, producing films, commercials, music videos and representing international directors.

Shake-tastic 14th year for Shakefest

The 14th Shakefest offered an energetic cultural and creative experience at Tullamore's Charleville Castle on June 1 and 2.

The programme included family friendly workshops and a colourful and eclectic evening Hafla of cultural entertainment.

Shakefest underlines the position of Charleville Castle as an international culture centre of the midlands, and the mission to help cultivate and appreciate diversity on a local, national and international level.

Happy City Samba provided an all ages workshop and performance on samba drum and dance.

For established dancers, Irina Popova from Russia showcased oriental bellydance

technique in three specialised workshops. Patricia Zarnovican from Germany demonstrated the tribal spirit of bellydance with her technical dance fusion techniques and American tribal style communal improvisational dance.

Local children's group Daltai Dance Group from Scoile Mhuire, Tullamore, took part for the first time in Shakefest's multicultural dance recital. Its dancing in unison, irrespective of creed, colour or ethnicity, sent a message of hope and sharing. Other performers on the night included: Elona Dance Group; Emerald Lakes Irish Dancers and Rakila Lithuanian Folk Dance.

An art exhibition 'Eternal Love' by YFleur du Mal and Rebecca Deegan was also part of this year's successful Shakefest.





Zita McGarry Kelly with Ronan, Tadhg and Paul Kelly at the Zita McGarry Kelly exhibition.



Rachel Ryan and Allison Moorhead at the Allison Moorhead Exhibition.



At the Daragh Coady book launch were: Eric Osa, Darragh Coady, Lee Jordan, Dennis Idahor and Martin Dolan.



Enjoying the Laura Woods Hoban exhibition were: Niamh Gallagher and Andrei Saavedra.



Ger Byrne, Tina Dunne, Cnoc Mhuire's Peter Devine, Shelley Corcoran, and Philomena Coyle at the Schools' Photography exhibition 2019.



Joe Flaherty, Maria Cribben, Shelley Corcoran, Jessica Thompson and Leann Halligan photographed at the Blood Sisters exhibition.



Attending the Longford Landscapes exhibition were: Alan Egan, Nathan Sheridan, Ken Keenan, Lalin Swaris, Mateusz Bednarek, Geraldine Dobson, Teresa Murray, Noel Carrigy, Seamus Butler, Fergus Kennedy, Peggy Nolan and Shelley Corcoran.



Gillian Lally and Claire Joyce at a music event in Birr Castle during Birr Festival of Music 2019.



Artist, Ann Morris with Olive Cuskelly and Paula Finlay at the landscape magic exhibition by Ann Morris at Aras an Chontae, Tullamore.



Tattoo artist Sam McGarry and Nicole Fallon.



At Birr Castle during Birr Festival of Music 2019 were Tommy and Patty Nee.



At the 36 Views of Croghan exhibition were: Roisin Swords, Croghan community development group, Sally O'Leary from the arts office, Veronica Nicholson (artist), Rose Dunne, Jean Dunne and Oliver Dunne, Croghan.



All the fun of the fair at Killua Castle.



Teresa Cox and Mary Keena at the Crane Bird Art School opening in the atrium.



Sarah Masterson and Olga Cosgrave at the launch of Anne Griffin's bestselling book 'When All is Said'.



All the fun of the fair at Killua Castle.



Drumcree Bog Festival



Photographed at the opening of Crane Bird Art School were Susan Brennan and Aida Cassiano.



Author Anne Griffin, Finbar Cody and Dolores Keaveney, guest speaker, at launch of Anne's bestselling book 'When All is Said'.



Monster doodle in Mullingar Atrium part of Cruinniú na Oge 2019



Michelle de Forge, director Dunamaisé Arts Centre; Chris Uys, Abbeyteix Bog Project; Caoimhe Hogan; Edel O'Rourke; Jock Nichol and Jackie Carter, Abbeyteix FEC art department.



Artist Sinead Dineen speaking at the recent opening of her exhibition at Dunamaisé Arts Centre titled 'Textured Flow'.



Mary Hogan at the 'Textured Flow' exhibition in Dunamaisé Arts Centre.



Martina Marron and Monica Delaney, Scoil Bhríde NS Portlaoise, and Aileen Delaney Barnashrone NS, at the School's Out for Summer, Heritage Hotel, Killenard. Image: Denis Byrne photographer.



Rosa Flannery, Music Generation Laois and Joe Cunningham CEO LOETB at 'Music at the Malt House' in Stradbally.



Music Generation Laois musicians John Davidson, Nuala Kelly and Carl Rochford at the Music Rich Schools Showcase. Image: Denis Byrne photographer.



Nuala Kelly, Music Generation Laois musician and children from Rath NS at School's Out for Summer, Heritage Hotel, Killenard. Image: Denis Byrne photographer.



Ryan Scully, Jackie Carter, Pat Wallis and Fay Scully at the 'Textured Flow' exhibition in Dunamaisé Arts Centre.



(Image: Shelley Corcoran)

Longford steps it out with samba

‘It’s loud and so it can help communities get heard’

Community is a big thing in Longford, with groups all over the county coming together to make their home a better place. One such group is the colourful, fun and highly entertaining Longford Samba Band.

The programme grew out of the Mide Street Theatre Group, the purpose of which is to train up local people to create public art spectacles in the county. Samba certainly does that.

“I had been involved in the organising of youth samba bands in Dublin city and called upon a few contacts to help us set it up,” said Shane Crossan, who has been involved with Longford Samba Band from the outset.

“Local public events such as the county’s St Patrick’s Day and Easter parades struggle to provide spectacle on a scale witnessed in the bigger towns and cities. The Longford Samba Band goes some way to address this.”

There’s certainly a proper community feel to it, inspired by the very origins of the

genre. Samba traditionally grew out of poor afro-communities in South America and is associated with community solidarity and social activism.

“It’s loud and so it can help communities get heard,” said Shane.

“It’s all built around the rehearsal. There is very little hierarchy in the group. We all have to learn the pieces which are based on a series of simple drum patterns played ensemble. We have people from all over County Longford and further still, from Slovakia, Congo, Brazil, Portugal. We even have people from Dublin.

“We have some parents and teenagers coming as well. We have a great teacher, Tom Duffy, from Rhythm Riot in Kilkenny. We also are very fortunate that one of our founding members is a great artist and problem solver – Phil Atkinson. And that is why we have amazing costumes – Phil delivered a series of workshops on costume-making to the group and we developed all of the band’s costumes out of that.”

The Longford County Arts Office has been very generously supporting this community initiative by providing grants for tuition and the band’s Samba drumming set. LWETB and the Attic Youth House Project have also supported the group by allowing them the use of their premises for storage and rehearsal.

“This September will be the start of our third year – my how time flies when you’re bangin’ the drum! So far, we have played in local parades, but this summer we are playing our first national gig – the Birr Summer Festival,” said Shane.

Longford Samba Band are starting up an eight-week programme for beginners in September – absolute beginners, Shane stressed, with no previous music or drumming experience necessary.

For more information or to get involved, see the Mide Street Theatre Group’s Facebook page.

MidlandsArts andCultureMagazine

A REVIEW OF THE ARTS IN LAOIS, LONGFORD
OFFALY AND WESTMEATH

