

Things Fall Apart: The Centres Cannot Hold!

Source: *Theatre Ireland*, No. 12, Youth and Community Issue (1987), pp. 69-70

Published by: Paul Hadfield & Linda Henderson

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25489077>

Accessed: 02-06-2018 10:53 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Paul Hadfield & Linda Henderson is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Theatre Ireland*

THINGS FALL APART

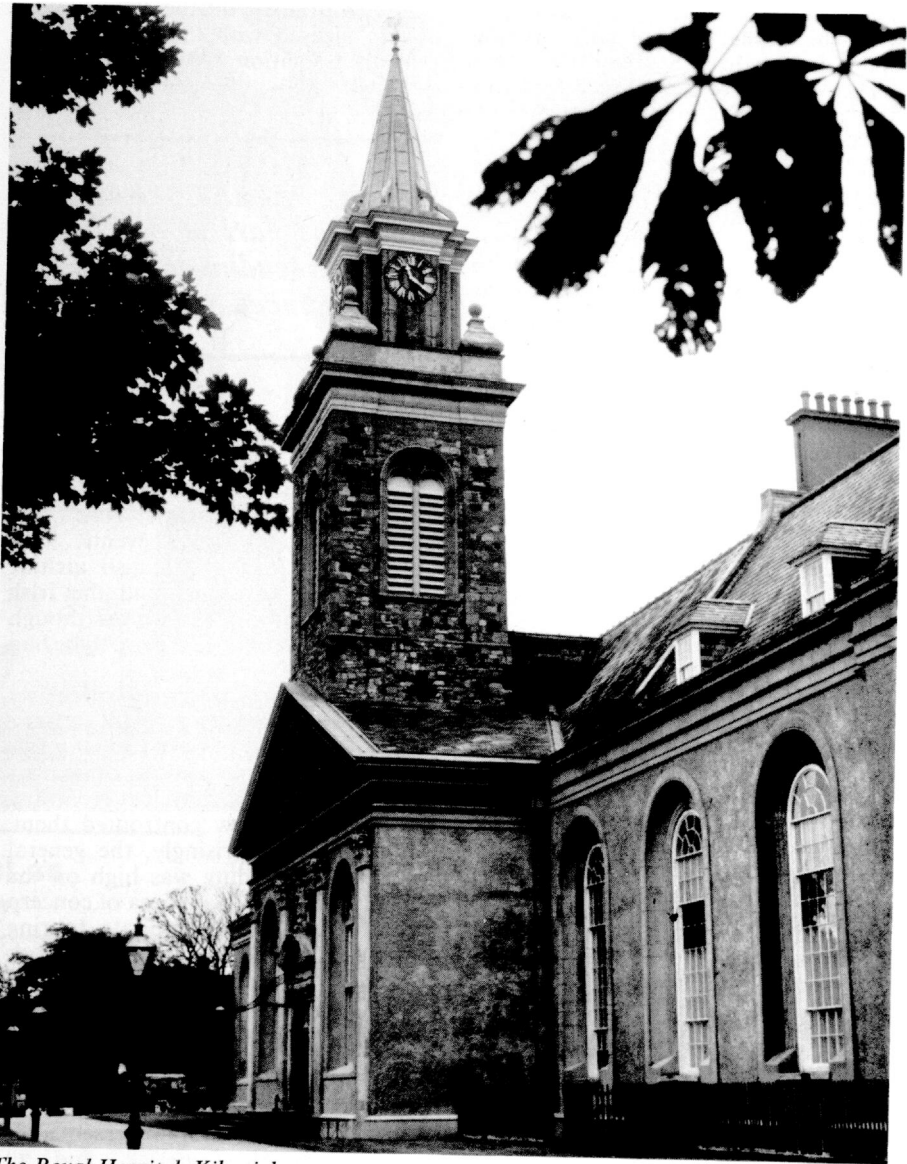
The Centres cannot hold!

The last ten years has seen a substantial increase in the provision of Arts Centre facilities throughout Ireland. In this brief survey we look at some of the problems they are now facing, and consider what implications this has for the development of theatre in general.

Not long ago, it would have been hard to explain to someone in Ireland what an Arts Centre was. Now there is a plethora of working models both north and south. They do not all, of course, conform to a single way of working, but what most share, by combining exhibition and performance spaces, is a wide-ranging programme, not limited to one specific discipline or medium. There tends also to be an emphasis on participation rather than passive spectating. At their best they can offer greater access to skills and resources to allow non-professionals to develop a more meaningful involvement in all forms of the arts and encourage cross-fertilisation between artists of different disciplines.

Within that general framework, the variety of facilities is vast. In Dublin, for instance, as might be expected, there is a much greater degree of specialisation. The **Project Arts Centre** has a long and distinguished history of providing a forum for most of the new and experimental theatre work seen in the city in recent years, although it also houses an attractive exhibition space. In decor, a virtue has had to be made of simplicity, though word has it that the staff toilet is primitive in a much less pleasing, if spectacular way!

The **Royal Hospital, Kilmainham**, by contrast, rejoices in some of the finest architecture in a city so rich, even now, in this respect. "There it has stood since the 1680s, offspring of Les Invalides and precursor of Wren's Royal Hospital, Chelsea. It is the most important 17th century building in Ireland." (*Country Life*). It has now been established by the Government as Ireland's "National Centre for Culture and the Arts". Within these magnificent surroundings, **Tony O'Dalaigh**, the Centre's Director, is creating a lively and varied programme of events which is bound to attract a wide and enthusiastic audience. Particularly imaginative is the decision to provide a home for **Horizon's** now almost traditional open-air summer Shakespeare production (this year *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). There will also be musical events ranging from open-air jazz and country to classical Indian flute. One very attractive feature of the Royal Hospital



The Royal Hospital, Kilmainham

is its restaurant which is already becoming noted for its Sunday Brunch, and the very theatrical mystery tour of the building that follows it.

"The extent of provision contrasts sharply with the situation in Belfast"

Dublin is also the home of the **Centre for the Performing Arts**, which provides invaluable services of information and space for the professional performance community. On a more public level, there is also the **SFX**, and the plans for the **City Centre** (dealt with elsewhere in this issue). While none of these organisations have it financially easy, the extent of provision available contrasts sharply with the situation in Belfast.

For almost ten years, the main focus of participatory arts activities in the Belfast area has been the **Crescent Arts Centre**. At the end of last year, ironically as a result of the start of a programme of refurbishment, the wiring in the building was found to be dangerous, all but the most basic insurance cover was withdrawn, and the Centre's activities ceased forthwith. Since then, the Centre's director, **Noreen O'Hare** has struggled for the building's survival as an arts facility. But with the recent announcement by the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland that the building is to be sold (the impending crisis is all the more ironic since the building is publicly owned!) it seems unlikely that there will be an arts centre in Belfast when the annual cycle of activities gets under way again in September.

Many of these activities have only continued since Christmas because of the temporary availability of Belfast's **Old Museum Building**. This marvellous regency building, modelled on ancient Athenian architecture, is owned by the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society, who had built it in the 1830s. They have no current need for the building and had given a consortium of arts groups including **Belfast Independent Video** and **Neighbourhood Open Workshops** six months to find the money to make a realistic offer for a lease. The hope was that it would become a multi-purpose media and arts facility. Sadly, time is already up, and although a substantial sum has been raised it is not enough for the consortium to proceed without some kind of statutory support. Although the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Belfast City Council favour the proposal, neither have been able to come up with the necessary finance*.

*See: **STOP PRESS** at the end of this article.

The result is that Belfast may very soon find itself to be one of the only centres of any size in the British Isles to be entirely without small-scale arts facilities.

Outside Belfast the situation in the North is much rosier. Antrim and Newry have very active purpose built centres, each attractively adapted from existing buildings of considerable charm, and similar facilities are being developed in Downpatrick and Newtownards. Coleraine supports the **Flowerfield Arts Centre**, which has flourished from its inception under the guiding hand of **Gerda Spence** (now alas lost to the BBC!). Her successor, **Cara McMahon**, however, is sure to build on this success, and is particularly keen to learn of plans for any small scale theatre tours.

Strangely, two towns which are very culturally active, Omagh and Armagh, do not yet have purpose-designed centres, but if their Festivals are anything to go by, when they do, they will not be put to waste. The most exciting development is certainly in

Derry, however, where building on the success of the Orchard Gallery, **Declan McGonagle** has exciting plans for the development of Old Foyle College. In this he enjoys the full and invaluable support of **Kevin McCaul** and the City Council, in addition to an energetic workforce provided by the city's extensive Youth and Community Workshop, under the tireless direction of **Paddy Doherty**.

Also enjoying continuing local authority support is the jewel in the coronade of northern arts facilities - the **Ardhowen Theatre** in Enniskillen. Although enjoying rather more elaborate facilities than the average arts centre, it shares the characteristic of varied programming.

Eamon Bradley, the theatre manager, is very pleased with the theatre's first year in operation. Attendances have

“That means that an important part of one of the country's leading industries is being financed by gambling!”

been consistently high, and the programme has been 95% professional. As well as hosting the **Actors Wilde** summer season with five full productions and fringe events, their forthcoming season will also include **Field Day**, **Charabanc**, and the **Irish Ballet Company**. He observes though that there is very little theatre to be had from south of the border.

This problem is of course particularly acute in the Republic where representatives of most of the country's arts centres met recently to draw up a letter to the new government recording the crisis that now confronted them. Although, unsurprisingly, the general low level of funding was high on the agenda, the other main area of concern was the lack of appropriate touring product. There is now quite a network of venues through the country - **Hawk's Well** at Sligo, **Nun's Island** in Galway, **The Belltable** in Limerick, the **Wexford Arts Centre**, and in Waterford, the **Garther Lane** (which is now, we may hope, going into the final stages of completion). Most were represented at the meeting in Limerick, and all endorsed the letter that resulted from the meeting. **Tim O'Neill** of the **Project Arts Centre** in Dublin was also there. He is feeling the financial crisis possibly worst of all and is in no doubt about the full scale of the problem.

“The chronic cash-flow crisis is made worse by the low level of funding given to the companies who we would hope to have into the Project. **Rough Magic** have been given only £17,000 for five productions. **Horizon** have got nothing at all. It seems that the only

qualification to be an actor at the moment is to be unemployed for thirteen weeks and to be under 25! The last government appointed a minister for Arts and Culture who produced a lavish document promising double the support for the arts. Two days later arts funding was actually cut. Now the new government has further reduced the level of funding. **Haughey** is not the friend of the arts he likes to appear. He just likes to be seen with famous artists. This is not the same thing. When are they going to realise that the arts are part of the country's second biggest industry - tourism. The biggest single spectator event in Ireland is traditional music. And theatre has just as important a place in Ireland's tourist image. Now there's all this talk about the lottery. That means that an important part of one of the country's leading industries is going to be financed by gambling!”

At **Hawks Well**, now in its sixth year of operation, **Rhoda McManus** is not in quite such desperate straits, partly because of the availability of a **Teamwork** (job creation) scheme. This not only provides the theatre with a resident company, but also with an essential back-up team of administrative personnel. But she too is acutely aware of the shortage of suitable touring materials. Fringe theatre has its place in any Arts Centre programme, but it cannot secure the sort of large and varied audience necessary for the effective development of such facilities.

The problem seems clear. There has been significant capital investment over the last two decades in facilities of this kind throughout Ireland. We must be very careful over the next few years not to let this heritage be destroyed under the weight of accumulated deficit. Nor must it be allowed to atrophy for want of suitable native contributions to their programming. □

***Stop Press:** Since this article was written it has become known that the Arts Council of Northern Ireland have secured some additional funding from the Department of Education towards the development of the Old Museum Building. We look forward to giving more details in the next edition of *Theatre Ireland*.