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HANGING PICTURES, NOT PRISONERS

Belinda McKeon 2006

There are certain connotations that an arts centre will want to avoid. Certain associations, certain undertones, a certain type of atmosphere. An arts centre, especially a newly-opened arts centre, will want to seem inviting, accessible; it will want to present itself, to artists and to audience members, as a place where risks can be taken and freedom of expression can be enjoyed. It will probably not want to be attached, both physically and symbolically, to a former gaol building; nor will it necessarily want to contain within itself a dark, dank tunnel once used to lead prisoners to their death by hanging on the adjoining scaffold. Especially if that scaffold is still in existence.

But such is the lot of the Dock, the arts centre which opened one year ago in the building which was originally the courthouse for the district of Carrick-on-Shannon, and long the seat of colonial administration. Disused since 1994, the building was unsurprisingly an unpopular spot in the Co. Leitrim town. But, one sensitive and imaginative restoration-cum-transformation later, all that has changed. Funded largely by Leitrim County Council, and to a smaller extent by the Arts Council, the Dock now holds three gallery spaces, a black box theatre, a number of studios for artists and filmmakers, a bar and a design shop. It's bright, it's spacious, and it has beautiful views over the river and the surrounding countryside, and, though some elements of its programme have been far more successful than others over this first year, it's a space which has left its unpleasant legacy behind.

For this, says the venue's artistic director, Caomhín Corrigan – also Arts Officer for Co. Leitrim – credit goes to the staff and the “passion and personality”, as well as local knowledge, they have brought to the space. But there's also the matter of location. Given the number of artists who have settled in the county, and in surrounding counties – drawn there as much by the unsentimental matter of lower property prices as by the beauty and relative tranquility of the area – as well as those who hail from the area, it's perhaps

surprising that it has taken this long for an arts centre to open in Leitrim's county town. There may be a very good arts centre – the Glens Centre, established in 1995 – further north in Leitrim, in Manorhamilton, with a well-known sculpture centre in the same town serving as a focal point for visual artists, and there are theatres in the nearby towns of Sligo, Longford, Roscommon and Athlone. But when it comes to performance venues, Carrick-on-Shannon has, until now, had to get by with hotel ballrooms and with the interior of a restaurant-barge on the river, with those spaces obviously having been much more amenable to music than to dance or theatre. With all this in mind, was there a palpable sense of relief in the town when the Dock finally opened its doors last year? “I remember a soundbyte I offered when the building opened,” says Corrigan, “that the Dock was very lucky to be *in* Carrick-on-Shannon, to be located there. There is an openness to it, and a curiosity. There's a...” He pauses. He was going to say tolerance, but it's “higher than tolerance”, he says. “There's an acceptance that it's important that there be an arts centre. That it's important within the community.” When artists began to move to Leitrim in large numbers over the past two decades, he explains, they made a difference to the local economy. “And that helps when an arts centre comes along. Beyond breaking down the doors to get into everything that's on, it's the notion of the centre being valid.”

And are local audiences are breaking the doors of the Dock down? Yes and no, it seems. Certain elements of the programme for this first year have gone well; have been, indeed, an exemplary success. The visual arts programme has been varied and busy – perhaps even too busy, with some thirty exhibitions, in all, having featured in the centre's three gallery spaces – while Staircase Poetry, a public art project by Alice Lyons, an American-born poet and visual artist who lives locally, has served both to draw the public upstairs towards those galleries and to draw attention for its own significant merits, its words written literally on the rising steps of the grand staircase.

Lyons's poetry project has been beautiful, but it has had a utilitarian purpose, too, says Corrigan. Though bright and airy, the foyer of the theatre retains the stern brow – in the shape of large stone buttresses and archways framing the stairwell – of the building's former function, and the risk was that the upstairs spaces would appear off-limits from

the ground floor. The staircase poems literally broke that imaginary line and enabled a natural flow within the building. The challenge now is to keep that flow going now that the poems' tenure has drawn to a close.

What of the other desirable flow, however – that of paying punters? The challenge for any new venue is to think on its feet during its first year of programming; to detect and to respond to the patterns of interest and indifference in its target audience within the same short space of time. Two very different performance art forms have so far proved the biggest draw at the Dock; traditional music and comedy. The success of the first, a monthly Trad club offering performances by top musicians including Seamus Begley and John Carty, says Corrigan, came as a surprise. Which might in itself seem odd, given Leitrim's thriving trad scene. But that's exactly the point. "There's good trad available already in the pubs in Carrick, so to see was there an audience that would come along and pay €15 to sit and listen without a pint in their hand...that was a success for us."

The monthly comedy club taps into another significant market in the town; Carrick's young population, drawn by the celebrity cachet of comedians they may have seen on television. The hope is that, in drawing people into the venue in large numbers for comedy, or for comedy-based theatre offerings, that a relationship will be established between the venue and those potential patrons; that those who come to a stand-up show or to a comedy-based piece of theatre, will grow to trust the venue and return for, perhaps, a Beckett play. A funny one, that is; *Malone Dies* is the example that Corrigan cites.

Why this reliance on the possibility of laughter to secure an audience? Is there not a wealth of work between stand-up and Beckett? Might not this dependence on comedy as "a good kind of 'get'", as Corrigan describes it, be interpreted as a reliance on the easy option where the performance arts are concerned? Corrigan allows that comedy has been a reference point for this year, "because it was important to break the notion of this authoritarian building, this precious art space, as well as the notion that nobody would ever choose to go into this building in its past form."

This is a fair point, but the relative paucity of professional theatre in this year's programme remains a problem. There have been some visiting productions, some of which, like Donal O'Kelly's *Catalpa* and Aidan Dooley's *Tom Crean*, sold out, and there have been productions by the local amateur and semi-professional theatre companies. The latter company, Beezkneez, will return in November with a new play written by their artistic director, John McDwyer. So, it seems, there's an audience for solid pieces of theatre, and even a local source of original plays. Why, then, has theatre not had a greater presence in the programme?

"We'd happily take more plays like that, but they don't get offered, don't cross my desk," says Corrigan, adding that other works of professional theatre have been far from sell-out successes. "It's partly because of our smaller physical size, but it's tricky to get a lot of good quality touring theatre that works in our venue, and there are issues around touring theatre in Ireland generally. Cost, cast sizes...and also there's a growing international interest, for Irish companies, in touring. Which has knock-on effects for regional venues." But professional theatre is a hard sell for the Dock in any case, he says, and it has been more difficult to formulate an artistic policy for the performing arts than it has been for the visual arts, "because there are more artists who want to exhibit." In the years ahead, he is hoping to work with theatre and theatre training professionals, including those who work in Fringe Festivals and on the new Performing Arts programme at the Sligo Institute of Technology, to work out a strategy for investing up to €20,000 yearly in emerging artists and companies. Corrigan already has some good ideas as to how the Dock might do this, but he's wary of putting them on the record until they're fully formulated.

The first birthday of the venue this month will not be marked with any fanfare, but with a quiet time during which Corrigan and his artistic and policy staff will work to put together a strategy for the next year and beyond. "The question for us is, or I think the question for us is, or one of the questions for us is, can we get people to buy into the notion of the Dock? That being something that's legitimately hit and miss? Can we get people to a point where around the town, you ask, what's on in the Dock, and somebody

says to you in 18 months time, I'm not sure, but there's always something different on.
That would be a *huge* win for us in 3 years."

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