

PERFORMING ARTS FORUM

WHERE CONNECTION CREATES CHANGE

THIS STATE WE'RE IN

SLIGO
GATHERING
28/29 MAY

A text by **Róisín Stack** //

During this year's Performing Arts Forum Annual Gathering, "the (actual) state of The Performing Arts" industry was well articulated. To take this provocation in another direction, we commissioned a text by Róisín Stack, 'This State We're In':

"We define a state by its environment, its economy, its cultural heritage, its borders. States can be free, disputed, recognised, rotten. The functionality, or health, of a state is often visible through its infrastructure but measured in figures: budgets, employment, exports, newcomers. The Performing Arts State is not

impervious to these yardsticks though at turns it resists the language of economics.

The Performing Arts is a liberal state. This is an important part of its identity though it exists within the slower, more traditional mechanics of the nation state, thus often struggling to realise the radical dreams of its proletariat in good time.

For example, in 2024, diversity is less an election promise and more of an emerging reality, evidenced by a **multiplicity of backgrounds and perspectives** taking the stage at this year's Performing Arts Forum Gathering in Sligo.

But access is slow, and those who experience barriers say it's often **more about ticking boxes than breaking them open**. A **more inclusive, more representative State requires a new politics**, what the academic Stuart Hall referred to as 'a **politics of difference, of self-reflexivity, a politics that is open to contingency but still able to act.**' There's no shortage of self-reflexivity in the Performing Arts State, but it's dependant on which self is given the microphone.

In the Performing Arts State, we can speak freely, which, after a presentation from Louna Sbou about the silencing and defunding of pro-Palestinian artists in Berlin, is not taken as a throwaway comment but a palpable privilege. **Fewer states speak as freely, humorously, loudly, openly, abstractly, distractedly, passionately, pointedly, metaphorically, meanderingly and frequently as the Performing Arts.** If the State had a currency, it might be conversation. We love conversations. But we're also tired of conversations.

We're also tired.

Like its global counterparts, the Performing Arts State labours within the neo-liberal climate of the **gig economy**. This creates a workforce of **multi-hyphenate artists**, or slash artists for the more horror-inclined: writer / director / producer / accountant / designer / performer / marketeer. There aren't as many institutions to house these slashers as some would like; old ways are lamented, but for others, the new landscape is exciting: **'we can do it all.'**

In 2024, the State has opened its borders a little more. It's funding more artists than ever which makes funding more competitive than ever. The arts budget increased during the COVID crisis when the **National Campaign for the Arts'** long-battle to have Ireland's overall funding raised in line with its European counterparts, was finally realised. Another boon during the pandemic years was the introduction of the Basic Artist Income pilot following years of campaigning by **Social Justice Ireland**, activists and arts organisations - a feat discussed with great admiration and emotion during the Sligo conference. These supports kept

a very fragile State in-tact during a tumultuous time, when many retrained in other industries and audiences, stages, projects and shows were lost. One arts worker asks if we might now be collectively going through a **'second year grief'**, mourning the loss and difficulty we experienced. But there were gains too: **investment in bursaries, residencies, professional development and capacity-building awards** allowed many to return to **process**, to lines of **inquiry and experimentation**. Although this wasn't a balm for a decade of cuts and precarity and though not all boats were lifted - many artists were unable to engage with their creative practice in any way and independent artists in particular continued to feel the weight of the system's bureaucracy - **the supports provided a lifeline for many.**

An activist reminds us that **crisis is cyclical** and that the State needs to be ready to fight its corner when the next one rolls around. Indeed, the future is something the Performing Arts understandably concerns itself with. Young curators want to know **'is anyone safe in their**

career? Will I always be emerging?' They want to be seen, they want a sense of progression, they want responses to emails.

At the heart of the Performing Arts ecology is the idea of **community, collaboration and shared responsibility**, but it's not an equal society. An artist living with his father **likens being an emerging artist to being a maggot: you're required for good compost, but nobody really wants you there.** The State doesn't have a single leader, nor is it leaderless. Within its power structures are pressures and frustrations: **there doesn't seem to be enough money; there is never enough money; nobody is safe and nobody is to blame; what about parents? What about AI? What about a break? Should we stop? What happens if we stop? Would it count as a protest? What is the power of protest in a new world order that ignores protesters?**

The Performing Arts is a malleable state; it can convene as an army though it's often more a lovee than a fighter. It can **lead the way in politics** and social change and is regularly rolled out

to promote national identity, with varying degrees of authenticity. In 2024, national identity is a sticky topic as anti-social movements in the name of 'Irishness' become more widespread. In carving out space for a plurality of identities, the Performing Arts can act as an **antidote to such regressive nationalism**. It is uniquely placed to identify and address dangerous discourse around patriotism, existing as it does on a divided island with a troubled history. Northern Ireland continues to grapple with the legacy of this division, under a dysfunctional government with paltry arts funding. **'The North wishes it had the problems of the South'** says one Belfast-based arts worker calling for more all-island arts opportunities.

Ireland was one of few European states not to elect a far-right government during the Populist Wave 2015-2020. Irish people were among the quickest to mobilise donations and demonstrations against the genocide of Palestine in October 2023. Though the Performing Arts' work on diversity and access has come too slow for

many, it exceeds other countries; a recent report into arts and disability in Norway recommended that **the country's much-lauded Arts Council and Arts and Culture bodies 'establish diversity as a central part of its core activities ... in line with countries like Great Britain, Ireland and Canada.'**

There's a fear that in acknowledging progress we undermine the urgency for making improvements, but to accept change as a constant is to be able to both take stock of and continue, necessary work. It's not about cultivating a poverty of ambition but about appreciating our privilege and finding motivation in the potential that has been realised to date. Yet the Performing Arts State is tired – tired of conversations, of exclusion, of competition, of precarity, of the feeling of starting from scratch every single time. We are torn between our wider global conscience and our immediate need to make art, to eke out a living in the nation state – one of the wealthiest countries in the world where people like us, on the lower end of the income spectrum, bear the brunt of a **housing crisis, a healthcare crisis, a childcare crisis, a climate crisis.**

Crisis is no longer cyclical it seems; it is constant.

On the final day of the conference, a recent theatre graduate concerned about future prospects recalls a quote from her college days: **'The old are dying and the new cannot be born.'** The quote is from Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist who believed that ideology was not determined by economic infrastructure but by individuals - social agents within a state. The full wording from his 1930 text reads: **'[t]he crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'.**

Almost 100 years later, a great variety of external threats loom on the horizon, while internally, the Performing Arts State aspires to address its great diversity of needs. The tension between these two forces **drives change** but **drains energy**. There's a requirement to reassert the ideal conditions for everyone to make art; **time, space, resources**. Although consensus, which assumes a single solution for all challenges, is not the goal. The

Performing Arts State comprises **'unities'-in-difference'**, and understands that equity is required to ensure a diversity of voices and opinions and that this will lead to a more complex, robust landscape. This is not yet a reality but it is clearly a vision and while it's a difficult time for idealism, it's **more necessary than ever if we are to survive the current rash of morbid symptoms."**

- Róisín Stack //

**PERFORMING
ARTS FORUM**

**WHERE
CONNECTION
CREATES
CHANGE**

**SLIGO
GATHERING
28/29 MAY**

www.performingartsforum.ie