# ART-MAKING, ACTIVISM, AND COLLABORATION: PLENARY CONVERSATION WITH LIAN BELL AND MAEVE STONE

**Chair: Clare Wallace**[1]

**Clare Wallace:** It is a real pleasure to close this conference with two amazing Irish arts practitioners whose work has engaged directly and dynamically with the arts and civic public spaces within the performance environment both in Ireland and abroad, as well as working across genres of different kinds of art-making with diverse communities and audiences. Since the theme of EFACIS 2021 has been interfaces and dialogues, it is especially apt that we finish with Lian Bell and Maeve Stone, who are ideally placed to tease out some threads connecting arts practices in Ireland, representational politics, activism, and the challenges of working in culture in the current moment. The keywords that I invited Lian and Maeve to reflect on as we were preparing this conversation were collaboration and change, resistance, resilience and, one way or another, these ideas will infuse and orientate what we discuss here. But before asking Lian and Maeve to tell us more about their work, interests and their current situation, let's begin with some brief introductions.

**Lian Bell** is a multidisciplinary artist, a freelance arts manager, and a designer for performance; she is perhaps most widely known as the Campaign Director of #WakingTheFeminists, a grassroots campaign for equality for women in Irish theatre. That campaign, launched in response to the Abbey Theatre's Waking the Nation 1916 centenary programme, ran from 2015 to 2016, and the outcomes of that public provocation and the subsequent dialogues it initiated is something that I think would be interesting to come back to for both our panellists today. In addition to widespread media coverage of the campaign, several academic articles have been written about that moment and #WakingTheFeminists that attest to the significance of what was achieved (Haughton; O'Connell; O'Toole). However, Lian's work also encompasses a lot of other things: scenography with the designs for Moonfish Theatre's *Redemption Falls* (2019), Annie Ryan's stage adaptation of *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, performed at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2014, Louise White's *This Is the Funeral of Your Life* at the Project Arts Centre in 2017, as well as work with theatre companies such as Pan Pan Theatre, Brokentalkers, Junk Ensemble, among others. Lian was also the Dublin Fringe Festival programme manager from 2009 to 2011 and was the exhibition coordinator for Ireland's contribution to the Prague Quadrennial in 2007.

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1 The following text is an edited version of the plenary conversation that took place on Saturday 4 September as part of EFACIS 2021. Clare Wallace acknowledges the support of the European Regional Development Fund-Project "Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World" (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734) and Klára Hutková's work in transcribing the original recording.

**Maeve Stone** is a director and writer for film and theatre; she is also an activist concerned with climate and feminism and participated in the #WakingTheFeminists campaign. She's project leader for axis, Ballymun's PopUp Green Arts Department and a Platform 31 artist focusing on climate and biodiversity in County Clare. She was a resident assistant director at the Abbey in 2012 and the first associate director with Pan Pan Theatre Company. Most recently, Maeve was the embedded artist for a European Cultural Adaptation project with Codema (Dublin's energy efficiency agency) and axis, Ballymun that considered the role of artists in climate adaptation. Maeve's first short film *The House Fell* premiered at the Cork Film Festival in 2019. Her theatre work is interdisciplinary and experimental, including a piece called *Bodies of Water* with Eoghan Carrick and Jonah King from 2019, *UNWOMAN* Part III with feminist theatre company The Rabble from 2018 and many other works.[2]

So, Lian and Maeve, welcome, thank you for joining us. I'd like to begin by asking both of you to speak a little about the background of your careers, the catalysts to your work in the arts and, also, how you know each other.

**Lian Bell**: I suppose I've been working in theatre for a very long time really. I got involved in youth theatre when I was a teenager in Dublin and I've kind of never stopped since. My connection with Pan Pan Theatre, which is how I think Maeve and I really got to know each other, started when I was eighteen and I volunteered for the Dublin International Theatre Symposium, which was an international festival that Pan Pan ran for a number of years.[3]

In some ways I identify myself with theatre, particularly because of #WakingThe Feminists, but I tend to work with lots of different kinds of arts organisations, not just theatre organisations. And in the last few years, I've been trying to sort of work out what my own work is as an artist, which is certainly the big question in my mind at the moment. I suppose I ended up in a kind of a dual career where I'm a designer and I'm also a project manager for different types of cultural events. In terms of the project management side of things, I'm usually interested in things that have either some aspect of international artists meeting Irish artists, or artist support and development, or sometimes, community-based arts. They tend to be my areas of focus. So, in the last number of years, I've run the Pan Pan International Mentorship programme, a programme called Gap Days which I've run with Mermaid Arts Centre, that provides micro-residencies to independent freelance theatre artists.

In normal times, I would usually be designing two to three shows of, mostly contemporary devised work, often not in conventional theatre spaces. I would be doing

2 For a fuller picture of Maeve's work, see her website: <https://www.maevestone.com/>.

3 The Dublin International Theatre Symposium was produced by Pan Pan from 1997 to 2003. The programme of workshops, talks and performances sought to bring together diverse approaches to theatre and performance from Ireland, Europe, and beyond. For further details, see <https://www.panpantheatre.com/symposia>.

two or three shows a year. Of course, and we'll come to this later, maybe, but … everything has changed in the last year and half.

**Maeve Stone**: Lian's done a great job of sketching the foundations of how we got to know each other originally. I also had the gateway drug of youth theatre as my introduction to theatre, and it's interesting because I think it's the first time where, as a young person, you're really introduced into a community of creativity, and that's really appealing at that age, and can do long-standing damage in terms of steering you away from a solid income and, you know, security in your life. But I'm very grateful to it as well, for introducing me to such amazing people and leaving me with interesting things to be doing with my time.

I studied in Trinity and when I finished, I was really interested in making work with a small group of writers, so I focused a lot on new writing. It was 2009 and the city had stopped; the global economic crash had emptied so many buildings around Dublin that you could get into places, and you could spend time and make a world. It was a really rich time for artists, and I was lucky to experience it. I'm crossing my fingers that the crisis that we're heading into currently, maybe is going to foster the same kind of fertility in creative circles as it once did.

So, yes, I was very lucky in that way and cut my teeth learning all of the mistakes first-hand. At that point, I realised that the work that I was most interested in was more experimental and I had the opportunity to assist Gavin Quinn and Aedín Cosgrove, the artistic directors of Pan Pan, on a couple of projects, and just kind of learned by watching. It was an odd time as well because I was simultaneously Assistant Director at the Abbey which is, obviously, the national theatre. As a result, I had this very bizarre cocktail of, on one hand, the most experimental, international work happening in Ireland and on the other, what some people would see as the most conservative or canonical work happening in the country. That year, both companies produced a version of *King Lear*, so by the end of the year I knew everything there was to know about *King Lear*, and all the ways you could approach it.

It also gave me a bit of time to grow creatively as well, led me to a point of questioning what was the work I wanted to make. I was really curious about the same kind of multidisciplinary approaches that Lian is describing where you have multiple sources of curiosity feeding your process. And one of the things that became central to my work at that stage was the idea of bringing people from different forms and different backgrounds together, because of the language that it required and because of the language it creates. If you've got people from really diverse contexts with differing frames of reference, you have to seek out the common language. It's like a very complicated Venn diagram, but the centre of that Venn diagram is so beautiful, if you can find it.

I think that really spurred me on towards more interdisciplinary, more experimental work. Around that time #WakingTheFeminists happened and was a booster shot in

terms of political action and political voice, not just for me, but for the entire industry. And that was another catalyst to the kind of work that I was making and the kinds of people that I was seeking to make work with. It was the same year I co-founded Change of Address, which is a collective that ran for five years with the aim of connecting artists and asylum seekers in a diverse range of projects.[4] I don't think we ever did anything twice; over the five years, there wasn't a single project that could be mistaken for another project.

So yes, I think my work has taken a strange path through discovery of creative and imaginative and story-telling ideas and ideals, and then more into political and macro themes – the way that we make work being as much of a source of power and pleasure as the kind of work that ends up being on stage for people.

**Clare Wallace**: I think what I'm hearing from you both is how forms of collaboration and process are of key importance to you. Ok, let's go back to #WakingTheFeminists. This is where, I think, in our present academic setting, most people will have heard of you and would have some sense of what you were doing. How would you describe the outcomes of that campaign, of that experience? Maeve has already started with some of the ways that involvement might have changed what you do. Lian, maybe that's an idea that I could come back to you with, I'm interested in what comes out of that activity as the after-effect, is there is a shift, would you say, either personally or generally?

**Lian Bell**: I mean, it's really hard to encapsulate because there were enormous shifts of all kinds, personally and within Irish theatre. I won't go into too much detail, but suddenly all our major funded theatre organisations in the country plus all the national cultural institutions in the country formulated gender policies, which they never had before. Because all of a sudden, we were going: "Hang on a second, you don't have one? Why don't you have one?" And realising that this was actually something that they were way behind on.

At a policy level, that understanding, maybe I'm too hopeful in saying an understanding, but at least an awareness that this is something that needs to be addressed is now present. On a very day-to-day level, I think, it's not an understatement to say that pretty much everybody in Irish theatre is conscious of it. Before #WakingThe Feminists, I look back and I think … why were we so nervous of talking about these things? But we really were and there was a real fear which I could feel at the start of #WakingTheFeminists, which simply started by me and a few other people beginning to write things on social media, and more and more and more people adding their voices, more and more women talking about their experiences in the Abbey and then not just in the Abbey – in theatre across Ireland. There was a real sense of danger

4 Change of Address was created by artists Moira Brady Averill, Oonagh Murphy, and Maeve Stone in 2015 "to increase visibility and raise awareness of the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in Irish society". For fuller details of their work, see <http://changeofaddresscollective.com/>.

around that, there was a sense of, "are you sure you really want to say that publicly?" Now when I look back at what people were saying, which I remember vividly at the time thinking was dangerous, I look at it and go: "Oh, is that all that they said?" So, the sense of what can be talked about in the workplace has completely shifted.

Obviously now the conversation, I'm delighted to say, is spreading out to more than just feminism, we're talking a lot more about intersectional feminism, about the fact that Irish theatre is still very, very predominantly, white … sadly and probably increasingly middle-class. We don't hear a lot of voices from the margins so, when something like, for example *Walls and Windows*[5] was on in the Abbey recently … a story written by a Traveller woman about a Traveller family, I sat there and I watched it and I thought: "I have never seen this before." I have never seen this story told from this point of view, and I just thought that was extraordinary. And all these things, I think, can be traced back in some way to #WakingTheFeminists.

From a personal point of view, pre-#WakingTheFeminists I was not an activist, I hadn't ever really spoken publicly – I was very much a behind-the-scenes kind of a person. It wasn't a choice. I didn't set out to go: "Right, let's create this campaign and make some big changes." It kind of happened, there was a group of us who went: "Right, we have to take this momentum and use it. Because otherwise it'd be a waste." And, you know, I'm very glad I did it. It's not a problem in any way, I learned a lot of things and I'm very grateful for that. But it did shift not just my sense of who I am, but how other people see me. It was like: "Oh, you're a leader, what're you going to do next?", "What're you going to lead next?" And I was thinking: "Am I? Oh my God, do I have to lead something? What do I want to lead?" It took a long time to just realize, "Oh no, I don't have to. That wasn't something I signed up to." Like I said, I'm glad I did it, but I'm also quite happy to just continue my path as an artist.

It was a big shift, that whole year; the campaign itself was only a year long but the echoes of it keep going on … and not just in theatre. It spreads out from theatre into other creative communities in Ireland. So yes, I really can't understate the hugeness of the change.

**Clare Wallace**: Thanks, that's so interesting.

**Lian Bell**: I've gone greyer, as well. Just, so you can all see. You can compare and contrast with five years ago. [*laughs*]

**Maeve Stone**: I know it's a cliché, but it's never felt truer than with you, Lian, that the best leaders are the people who don't want to be them. You know, they're the people who aren't choosing that for themselves, but who are the perfect ones to perform that role at that time. I know I am incredibly grateful to you, and I'm not alone in that. I think there are an awful lot of people who are very grateful to you, and particularly

5 *Walls and Windows* by Rosaleen McDonagh was performed at the Abbey Theatre on 23 August-11 September 2021. It was also available as a livestream. The play is published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.

grateful that it *was* you, as well, for a multitude of reasons – one of them being that there was a care in how the conversation was conducted, particularly in the early days when it was held on platforms that are incredibly shouty as a species. It was one of the few times I'd actually seen those platforms used in a way that was holding space in a very caring and positive way around a subject that was a critical subject … particularly of an institution. I think it set the tone for #WakingTheFeminists. It gave the movement an identity that we were all very proud of. Often with political movements or moments of political shift where the paradigm changes, there can be a lot of confusion over what the message or idea includes. There can be multiplicity in the ideas that makes it confusing or difficult for a person to say wholeheartedly: "Yes, I'm behind this. I believe in this. This represents exactly how I feel."

But I think that Lian and the core group of people who were working together from the very beginning were incredibly well-positioned and had incredible skill in directing conversation in a positive way. When you ask the question of what are the kinds of contemporary resonances of that, I think, as Lian says, there's no way of measuring it because when it has that organically positive origin story, the ways it grows are equally expansive because it's a positive message that people can get behind and endorse. There was a philosophy, or an idea, underneath #WakingTheFeminists from the very beginning – and I don't know whose idea it was, but I suspect it might have been yours Lian – which was that if you wanted to be a part of #WakingThe Feminists you were, and if you wanted to host a #WakingTheFemists event you just did. And so, there was no centralized messaging, there was no governance of what the conversation should be, which democratized it completely. It gave people ownership of the idea that things were changing. And that meant that things did change at a very personal level, which have just continued to grow out into the ecosystem.

For me personally, it's not a coincidence that #WakingTheFeminists is the same year that Change of Address was created. It was started by two other women and me, and I think one of the things that the moment offered was conversation between women. That conversation seeded all sorts of projects, which if you could map them would be the most beautiful map I've ever seen. Though I have no empirical evidence to support it, I feel confident in saying that the seed of political action that #WakingThe Feminists sowed amongst women and amongst men, absolutely fed the Repeal Campaign, which had been gathering momentum at that time. For me the two are inextricably linked. I would not have had the confidence to just step into that political conversation, and to show up for what I believed in in the same way if I hadn't already had the incredibly connecting experience of #WakingTheFeminists.

**Lian Bell**: Absolutely. I think there was a very clear series of big social movements and big social events where the energy moved from one to the other. The big things from my point of view were marriage equality, #WakingTheFeminists, followed by #MeToo as it happened in Ireland, and particularly in theatre with Grace Dyas, a

young theatre director, who basically outed the person who had run the Gate Theatre for the previous thirty-three years and very publicly talked about his behaviour towards her and started a whole ball rolling with that. And I know she has said she wouldn't have been able to do that without #WakingTheFeminists. Then that led on the following year to the Repeal Campaign and … I think it's still going. There's been such huge social change in Ireland in a very short period, and there's a feeling now in Ireland, certainly in the circles that I am aware of – "OK, we've done all these big things, what next?" Looking out for the next big thing to put our energy into. And I do think now it's probably housing … hopefully when things start opening up again. So, I'm hopeful that'll be the next little social revolution in Ireland.

**Maeve Stone**: Connected to that as well, and a very direct response to the wave of female voices in political spaces, if you want to put it that way, is gender representation in politics. There's been a huge shift, I'm thinking specifically of Sarah Durcan, who was directly involved in the #WakingTheFeminists campaign and who's now one of our leading female politicians, one of the ones I would have the most hope for in terms of tackling some of those big social issues like housing, and climate.

**Clare Wallace**: Yes, and people like Ivana Bacik, who has been around since the early 1990s in the struggle for reproductive rights…

**Lian Bell**: Absolutely, and who was on the stage as a compere for the #Waking TheFeminists event when she was still a senator. She's obviously been an incredible force for social change for decades. So yes, I'm delighted that she's now in the Dáil.

**Clare Wallace**: These changes are so extensive; it's hard to grasp them properly especially from afar. Certainly, the expanding after-effects of those debates and discussions are palpable in the work produced now at the Abbey and elsewhere, in plays like *Walls and Windows*, as you've said, but also the incredible performance *Home: Part One* which was broadcast during lockdown.[6] It seems as if there's a whole sequence of recent work actively beginning to unpack what's happened.

Let's turn to what you've been doing since. Quite obviously both of you work in very non-singular ways, in a fashion that's very much about collaborating with others and creating networks. It would be interesting to hear a bit more about how that defines or complicates your ways of being artists or your creative practice. I think I sense this with Lian especially, when you have two hats, the management and the artistic one. And in our earlier conversation you brought up the point about "What's 'centre' and what's 'periphery' or what's home and what's beyond?" So, maybe, can I start with Maeve? Would you describe some of your work to us?

6 *Home: Part One* was created collectively as a response to the publication of the *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes* (January 2021). *Home: Part One* drew on the testimonies of survivors whose words were read by actors and leading public figures. It was broadcast online on 17 March 2021 (<https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats-on/home-part-one/>).

**Maeve Stone**: Ok, I'm just going to do a speedy trip through some of the highlights from my career over the last decade or so. I'll start with *Wake*, a site-specific piece which was a seed of an idea that grew through a commission from the Limerick City of Culture in 2014.[7] They had brought an Australian organisation called Chamber Made Opera on board, and there was an open call which I was really excited to be chosen for because it meant collaborating with an experimental opera company in Melbourne and devising a piece that ended up being an opera with no singing.

Fig. 1. Katherine O'Malley and Tom Lane in *Wake*. Photo courtesy of Ros Kavanagh.

We chose to work with dance artist Katherine O'Malley, who's in the picture above. It was a piece that focused on the nature of grief, grieving,, and the wake ritual in Irish tradition. It speaks to or from the things that we can learn through grief and through loss. And this was also one of the first echoes of dealing with the climate crisis in my work; the piece was looking at the idea of flood events in the city and was made personal through the idea of the loss of the mother. So, it was a really special piece to work on.

*The Shitstorm* was another amazing, but very different, experience. It is the only piece of straight theatre I think you'll see on my list. *The Shitstorm* was a co-commission by the Abbey and Dublin Fringe in 2017. It was my homage to *The Tempest* and to the character Miranda. I wanted to, on the back of #WakingTheFeminists,

7 Performed by Katherine O'Malley and created by Maeve Stone in collaboration with Chamber Made Opera, *Wake* (2014) "is a response to the ancient 'Curse on Limerick' by St Munchin who grew so furious at the lack of help from locals in building his church that he prayed strangers would prosper in the town whilst locals would remain forever unfortunate and unsuccessful" (<https://www. maevestone.com/wake-1>).

deep dive into the canon with a feminist lens and I set on Shakespeare's last play, or the one that we know that he was definitively involved in writing last. I wanted to explore the character in a different way because Miranda as a character is incredibly controlled and quite contrived. The origin point for me was thinking about if there were a sequel to *The Tempest*, and Miranda and her father were alone on the island together – and she's a teenage girl, right – so, what happens? And if she had more autonomy, more voice, what would it sound like? That led very organically towards the Riot Grrrl movement, towards punk music, towards the origins of protest female voices in public spaces … Spot the connection! It ended up being a collaborative project with Simon Doyle as a writer. Simon wrote a couple of pieces that have been made with Pan Pan including *Oedipus Loves You*, which was a really influential piece in my early theatre life.

*The Mouth of a Shark* is the first performance outcome from the Change of Address work. And it was a commission from THISISPOPBABY for their Where We Live Festival in 2018.[8] It took us three years to feel confident that we had earned a place as people who have built friendships within the community, so that beginning to collaborate, professionally and creatively, wasn't a nervous territory for us anymore. It didn't feel like it would lead us in the wrong direction towards work that could be exploitative or damaging or negative in any way for the people that we were working with. It took us a long, long time to get there, and I think it was a beautiful piece to work on.


Fig. 2. Photo courtesy of THISISPOPBABY.

8 *The Mouth of a Shark* was directed by Oonagh Murphy, composed by Maeve Stone, and was created with Michelle O'Rourke, Osaro Azams, Daryl McCormack, and Ashley Xiu for the "Where We Live" Festival at the Complex in Dublin, including a community choir from immigrant and asylum communities. Produced by Karen Twomey.

It was specifically about LGBT experience, so it used verbatim interviews with Irish people who left Ireland in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s because it wasn't safe to be gay. They were matched by narratives of people arriving in Ireland today because it's not safe to be gay where they're coming from. We were working with extraordinary people and it was my first experience of trying to cast Ireland in a diverse way. And my God, it was really, really challenging. It made me realize that the skills that I'd been developing in thinking about art in a non-linear way were incredibly useful and important when it came to challenging the methods, the approaches, and the processes that we were using day to day. For example, if we want to cast a show with four people who aren't quite Irish, we need to think in a different way. I think that's something that became really important and positive with that work.

*UNWOMAN* Part III was a collaboration with a company from Melbourne called The Rabble, another resonance from #WakingTheFeminists. The Rabble are a radical feminist theatre company who make extraordinary work. *UNWOMAN* Part III was commissioned by the Fringe Festival in Dublin in 2018 and starred Olwen Fouéré. It then had its premiere in Melbourne with an Australian cast in 2019.

Fig. 3. Photo courtesy of Pato Cassinoni.

The piece was about bodily autonomy and pregnancy as an experience. Ironically, the project did not get funded by the Irish Arts Council, but the Dublin production was funded by the Australian Arts Council. Keep in mind that it was presented in Dublin in 2018, the year of the referendum for abortion rights; it was quite eye-opening to have that experience of support from afar but not locally. And I'm grateful for the opportunity to make those connections abroad.

The last known live work that I presented before the world stopped working is *Bodies of Water*; it was a collaboration with Jonah King, a visual artist based in New York, Eoghan Carrick, another director, and Úna Kavanagh, an incredible performer and visual artist. It was presented at the Dublin Fringe Festival in September 2019.

Fig. 4. Úna Kavanagh in *Bodies of Water*. Photo courtesy of Alex Gill.

Again, it was a piece taking grief as a central structure, a scaffold, and looking at the climate crisis at a personal level via a character who is mourning loss of a lover from years back. It was loosely based on the life of Bastiaan Ader, an artist who disappeared at sea as he attempted to cross from America to Europe.[9] His widow was left in charge of his estate and that became her job. I became fascinated with the story and the relationship between the person left behind and the work, and the world's relationship to that work. So, it's a piece that took the idea of the North Atlantic gyre, which is just filled with our rubbish and spins constantly as a central image, and then builds the story of this woman's grief around that image.

**Clare Wallace**: It's a pleasure to hear about your work and to get a sense of its evolution. I'll hand over to you now, Lian, could you tell us a bit about some of your projects?

**Lian Bell**: Sure. There are so many different types of work that I've done over the years, in different directions. So, I've taken three pieces of work, just to show you

9 Bastiaan Ader, also known as Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975) was a photographer, performance and conceptual artist. He vanished during an attempt to cross the Atlantic in a thirteen-foot sailboat. His empty boat was found off the coast of Ireland in 1976.

three very different things that I've worked on over the years – but you might see connections between them. I will, basically, just show you my website lianbell.com, which means that you can always go back and see more. I splinter into three simple headlines: Set Design, Artwork, and Arts Management, which is kind of the easiest way to describe what I do.

Under Set Design, you'll see all the different projects I've worked on over the years. One of these, *Foyle Punt*, is a show that I worked on about three years ago with a company called the Local Group, which was a very short-lived collective. The person who's the producer, who pulled it all together is called Róise Goan. She's now the director of Artsadmin in London. Many years ago, we met because she was the director of Dublin Fringe Festival when I was the Programme Manager. She got in touch with me and a few other artists, including Caitríona McLaughlin now co-director of the Abbey Theatre, Little John Nee who is a musician and performer, Farah Elle (Farah El Neihum) who is a young Irish-Libyan singer-songwriter, Jennie Moran who is a visual artist working mostly in food and hospitality, and a few other people.

And we made this show which, improbably, had a boat and we did it in five different little harbours around Donegal, Derry, and Sligo. The boat – handmade by Philip McDonald, a boat-builder from Greencastle, and his brother – is called a Foyle Punt, which became the name of the show.

Fig. 5. Jennie Moran, Little John Nee, and Farah Elle performing in *Foyle Punt*. Photo courtesy of Darren Murphy.

The audience was split into different groups and got to see different things at different times. Obviously, in each harbour everything was different, we had to reconfigure everything each time. Caitríona, the director, and I would come in with our plan of what the show was in the morning, and look at the space and go: “Right, we’ll do this bit there, that bit there, that bit there, that bit there, right, Ok, let’s put everything up.” We had no time at all, so it was all very quick.

Fig. 6. Boat-maker Philip McDonald performing in *Foyle Punt*. Photo courtesy of Lian Bell.

The photo above shows one of the performance spaces. What I did was create this table with tools, the outlines of tools on it, which were tools that came from the boat-builder’s shed. And Jenny, the artist, had a kind of a kitchen set up nearby and as the boat-builder described how he made an oar with his tools over on one side, Jenny over on the other side was making food, which she then served to everybody on the end of the oar. And at one point they wiped the table. All of the tools were made out of sawdust from the floor of the boat builder’s shed, so they all got wiped away. At the end of the performance, we turned the boat into a table and served the dinner that Jenny had made during the performance around fire pits to the audience. I had different set elements that we set up in different spaces that had to shift for each performance, of course. We also got all the audience into lifejackets, so they almost became part of the set, as well. So, I hope that gives you an idea of the sort of set design, site-responsive, collaborative, devised pieces that I have worked on. Those are the things that I love the best, for sure – in terms of being a designer.

In terms of being a manager, *Wandering Methods* is a project that I worked on in 2012 and 2014 between Bealtaine Festival – a festival for older people and creativity

in older age, basically – and an organisation in Birmingham called Craftspace, and the Office of Public Works, which is the organisation that manages many of the historical buildings in Ireland. For this project, I was the coordinator, rather than an artist on it. But I also had to lend my artistic eye to it. We worked with a group of older people who lived near Rathfarnham Castle in 2012 and another group who lived near Dublin Castle in 2014, bringing in craft artists to work with them.

We spent a lot of time in the buildings, looking at the architectural details of the buildings, looking at the history of the buildings, and then teaching those women and men craft skills to use some of those details and those stories to make into things. The first year we worked with a paper-cutting artist called Maeve Clancy and a wallpaper designer called Linda Florence. The participants made spectacularly beautiful work.

Fig. 7. Participants at work in Rathfarnham Castle. Photo courtesy of Lian Bell.

My job was getting the people involved, facilitating everything, and also just helping to work out how we were going to display things because we didn't know what the project was as the start. We just started and then had to make it up and respond to it as time went along. So, this is one of the exhibitions I designed that we made in Rathfarnham Castle. You can see how beautiful ceilings there are, and then some of the paper-cut responses and print responses that came from the participants.

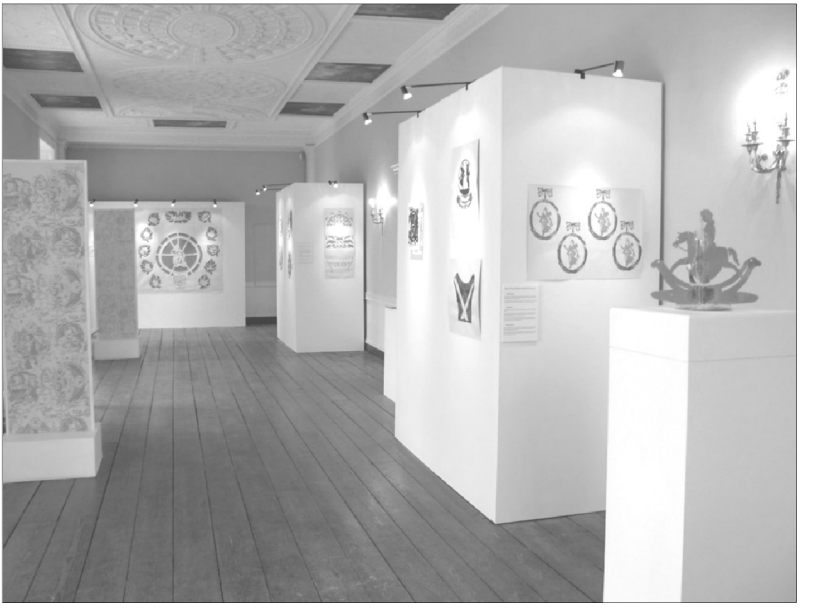

Fig. 8. *Wandering Methods* exhibition, Rathfarnham Castle. Photo courtesy of Lian Bell.

Finally, in the last few years, I've been thinking a lot more about my own artistic work because I've always worked collaboratively, and I really enjoy that. I went to Trinity College where I studied the Theatre Studies undergraduate course, then I went to Central Saint Martins in London and I studied scenography, which was a course that was a lot more about making your own, visually-led work – usually, in an installation or in a performance – time-based work. And that involved me making my own work, which I haven't done for a very long time. So, I'm still working out what that is … and, you know, where it goes.

But weirdly, a few years ago the Glucksman Gallery, which is in University College Cork, a beautiful gallery, did a call-out for artists who use photography in some way in their work. Not necessarily photographers but artists who use photography and I pulled out this piece which ended up being a series of five images. The work actually comes from research that I was doing while I was in Central Saint Martins, twenty years ago. It ended up being pairs of images with text in five frames. These were photographs taken when I was twenty-one-ish in my grandparents' house, the day the house was being cleared. Seeing all the places that I knew, all the objects, all the things that were associated with my grandparents and knowing that they were going to be moved. The piece is called "Sum Total (Becoming Things Again)".[10]

10 "Sum Total (Becoming Things Again)" was part of *The Parted Veil* exhibition on commemoration in photographic practice at The Glucksman Gallery, Cork, 2019.

Fig. 9. “(Sum Total) Becoming Things Again”, The Glucksman Gallery.
Photo courtesy of Lian Bell.

At that time, I interviewed different people in my family about the objects that they remembered. I was talking about my grandfather because my grandmother was still alive, and I transcribed that. In London I’d made a piece based on that work, but this was something else that came out of it many years later. In each frame there are two photos, and above and beneath were transcribed texts from different people. For instance, in the picture below, the top part reads:

> Em. He was never as involved as… one would have liked I suppose. He certainly treated me as the boy of the family. With the constant feeling of failure because I wasn’t a boy.
>
> I don’t know if this is the sort of stuff you want.

Fig. 10. “Sum Total (Becoming Things Again)”, The Glucksman Gallery.
Photo courtesy of Lian Bell.

While the text beneath the photos reads:

> And the two of them together were very elegant, very, very eh elegant, and social, a very sociable pair emm. His evening jackets of course you know from faraway places were something else, I mean you would, I haven't seen another human being wearing anything like that (laughs). Even the … the evening jackets … brocadey sort of things like that. Yeah, but rich, rich materials too and … umm. I mean god, we/I remember them getting dressed up to go to the Horse Show and he … he, I think he wore a top hat to the Horse Show and he'd get all dressed up and Ma on his arm, you know, who'd gone to Paris to buy her hats, and gone to the best, best umm couturiers and gone to get her outfits made. Outfits you know. They'd have maybe, she'd have two or three for the week, you know? Anyway.

These were little snippets of people's memories of my grandparents, basically, who were, obviously, going to the Horse Show in top hats. [*laughs*] Snippets juxtaposed with those images of household objects and furniture. So, that's just to give you a really fast overview of the variety of things that I end up doing. Which is hard to describe … and also confuses the hell out of me … and is part of my ongoing existential crisis, in life. [*laughs*]

**Clare Wallace**: With existential crisis in mind, [*laughs*] obviously, everybody has been experiencing an incredible sense of suspension and halt with the pandemic. And now it's further complicated by the fact that reopening seems to privilege certain activities over others, in Ireland at least, for the time being – GAA events can happen, but music events cannot, and so on. It's a period of suspension that we're, hopefully, coming out of, but it has hit the arts sectors particularly hard. How would you describe the impact of that on your own work? Have you just … been in suspension yourself or have you something up your sleeve? Maeve, I know you were working on the Cultural Adaptations Project which has been distorted by the pandemic disruptions. Maybe we could, just briefly, start with that?

**Maeve Stone**: The Cultural Adaptations Project[11] was a research project across four different cities: Dublin, Gothenburg, Ghent, and Glasgow, and it kind of positioned me on a new journey. I was really interested in understanding where my skills and thinking could be useful within the climate conversation as it is evolving in an Irish context. It was interesting to be set on that path in advance of this gigantic global crisis, because it had seeded all of these questions for me, and while the practical outcomes of the project, as you say, became much more adapted to an online world and maybe not as connecting and walking-based as I would have liked, I think that it was also a really useful and powerful thing to be in conversation with so many people internationally about climate issues and seeing, I guess, some of the overlap in an intersectional approach to ecology and to feminism and to rights and access to housing. All of these things suddenly felt as if they were a part of the same conversation.

11 Information on the Cultural Adaptations Project and the artists embedded in the scheme is available at <https://www.culturaladaptations.com/adaptation/>.

As an artist, particularly in theatre in Ireland, you're a vulnerable species. And when the lockdowns happened, and ours was the first industry to close, we were very conscious that, even in those early days, we would probably be the last industry to reopen. I think it forced an existential crisis upon us all: "Can we survive this?" and then: "When we survive it, what do we want to have changed in the interim?" Without being naively optimistic or trying to make a beautiful thing out of a really hard time ... it's been incredibly challenging and there's an awful lot to talk about in terms of: How can a person be creative when a person is afraid, when a person is anxious? Living in a daily state of fear and anxiety, but also feeling like, the one thing I can do with myself is work. Then how do we manage that? At points of crisis and emergency, how do we access the things that make us happy as artists? … which are the creative tools we have spent our lives building. It was challenging and confronting to realize that they're some of the things that can be taken away in those moments of extremity. But then also slowly feeling like there was space and time … I don't know, I feel like there's too much in terms of trying to figure out "What just happened?" [*laughs*]

**Lian Bell**: I still feel like we're very much in a state of suspension. I think the rug was pulled from under everybody, particularly in theatre because it just stopped. Around the world, theatre stopped. Completely. Which was quite shocking … it shook a lot of us to our core. And I think as you alluded, Clare, to all the debate around when different things should open, and sport seems to be the favoured child of the country, as that's the most important thing to open first. As somebody who has worked in the arts for a long time, and as somebody who still struggles with calling myself an artist, actually saying it out loud … there's a huge struggle with self-confidence. Personally, but also collectively, we have a big struggle with self-confidence, and that's been exacerbated massively in the last while because people, particularly working in theatre, haven't had a chance to work in theatre.

So, as things open up again, there's going to be a lot of people not feeling confident about their skills. And, sadly, it's not just around the pandemic. I think we've been told, throughout our professional careers: "Aren't you great for doing what you love", followed by: "But when're you going to get a real job?" Which you hear, maybe not explicitly, but implicitly your entire career. It's almost a schizophrenic thing that Ireland has – in relationship to its artists – in that we have this great calling card of Irish culture and it's the thing that we're known for around the world. It's one of the most important aspects of our internationally facing selves, while at the same time, we're not nourished as artists, we're not supported as artists, and arts is seen as a kind of an added luxury to life. And there was a great moment last year where I felt: "Oh, look, now that everything's been pulled away from everybody, everyone is starting to understand how important the arts are and culture is in their life because they don't have it anymore. They can't go to gigs, they can't go to the cinema, they can't go to theatre." And then this year, to see the value of the arts so very clearly placed very far down the rungs of the ladder made me go: "Oh, maybe I was being a

bit optimistic there." [*laughs*] That, you know, Ireland had woken up to why the arts needs to be supported. And how intrinsic it is to our lives.

But I am still hopeful, one of the things I'm hopeful for is that there's been a year and a half of so many artists sitting and thinking and pondering and developing ideas and, really, giving a lot more time to ideas than they would normally have a chance to, so that when things get going again there is going to be a sudden rush, not just in Ireland but internationally, of really interesting work. I'm very optimistic about that. I'm also optimistic about what Maeve was saying happened post-Crash, particularly in Dublin, when all of a sudden space was accessible and affordable. That hasn't been the case in Dublin for a long time. And now, again, there's this feeling of: "Oh, if we suddenly get access to more space, we'll be able to do a lot more." You know, we've all been sort of working out of our bedrooms – or leaving Dublin. Maeve is just one of the artists who's left Dublin in the last number of months.

So, I feel like there's a lot of possibility, and there are a lot of things to look forward to. But the things that I was really hoping might shift, which was the idea of the arts being actually valued at a fundamental level by our country, I am, sadly, less optimistic about them than I was this time last year.

**Clare Wallace**: Thank you so much, Maeve and Lian; I think those are interesting thoughts to land on because, of course, we don't know yet what is to come. And there *are* these enduring questions of what is valued, what seems to be valued and then how it's valued, how it's evaluated… and that is a constant process. We have a few moments for open questions and comments, so I would welcome some audience participation.

**Katharina Rennhak**: I was fascinated by the insights you gave us, and I also want to thank you for joining us here for EFACIS 2021. You shocked me a bit there because I could never have imagined such fabulous artists like you are struggling with their self-confidence but it's, of course, very convincing now that you explained this to us and that's something, I think, you share with many in the academic community and, therefore, I just wanted to say: We shouldn't. We have all good reasons, and you definitely have to be confident, and we should work towards establishing this confidence in the future. And I hope that our European co-operations help and that together we will fight this misbalance of what is deemed important in our societies. So, basically, thanks again for a wonderful last session for this conference.

**Lian Bell**: Thanks, Katharina. I was just going say, in response to that … A conversation that we had with Clare a couple of days ago touched on this. I think academia and the arts both struggle with being defined within a capitalist society. What we stand for and what we value, and what we *do* for society is being constrained by a capitalist system that doesn't value the intangible. It's always looking for how do we report on things, how do we assess things. And unfortunately, that might be one of the aspects of lack of self-confidence. When you're told over and over

again that what you do doesn't really have value because – underlying that – it's not making money which is the main point obviously, and if it's not making profit for anybody then it's not valuable. I think that underlies a lot of the reasons why there's a confidence crisis. And I *would* say in the arts, there is a confidence crisis. We're maybe very good at hiding it because we've done it for so long – but there definitely is.

**Maeve Stone**: It brings to mind as well, an amazing civic practice artist called Frances Whitehead, who's an American artist, and she spoke at a conference that I was involved in. She said that it's hard to deal scientifically with feelings. And I think that there is something of that in what we're describing here, where there's an empirical value system – a hierarchical empirical value system – that is prescribed by capitalist structures that don't make space for human beings having feelings, and doubt and fear and all of those things that make us human, and that actually are the fabric of what connects us all to one other, as well, and, you know… those are often the subjects that we gain from the most when we can experience them through art. They're the most cathartic things that we can experience. It stuck with me because it seems to sum up so much.

**James Little**: I was interested to hear the topic of housing come up so many times in both your talks and it's something that's the central political issue in Irish society at the moment, and something that theatre practitioners and artists working with space are really well-equipped to feel – to go back to Maeve's idea of an art of emotions. I know this might be an impossible question to answer, but I was wondering if you see the kinds of availabilities for space opening up in a way that they did after the Crash of 2008-2009 … is that possible to sense yet? Or do we still have to wait and see what happens?

**Lian Bell**: Certainly, in Dublin I think it's still early days. We've been walking down the streets where all the shutters have been pulled down for months and months and months, and we're at a point where some of those shutters are coming up but not all of them. And we don't know yet – are they not going up because the business is closed? Or because the person is still not confident about being exposed to other people? Or are there other reasons behind it? So, we just don't know yet … it's kind of like waiting to see what the city is going to look like again.

Another thing is, as we emerge from our lairs and come out into the light and look around, I'm slightly terrified that we're going to emerge and look around and realize lots of people have disappeared. Lots of artists will have left the arts because they needed to make money elsewhere, and not just the artists, technicians, production managers – the people who actually make things happen but very much behind the scenes. A lot of those will have had to find other jobs, and a lot of them will have left Dublin. And that's a really interesting change in Ireland, the spreading of people into the countryside.

The questions of whether that's long-term or not, of what it does to how we work together and of how/where art is available because it's been very concentrated on the capital city and on cities, and so on are still very much open. So, I'm hopeful, again, where art is available around the country will change. But Maeve is the expert on this because she is one of the people who has left the capital.

**Maeve Stone**: [*laughs*] Yeah, it was odd timing. I left two months before the pandemic, and it was on the back of thinking about future emergencies and really questioning what I wanted for my life in the event of an emergency. I want to be *not* in a city, I want to be near my family, and I want to be really connected and embedded in a strong community that I can add value to. So, that was kind of the thinking behind our move out West.

But it's been really interesting because, even with the Crash in 2008-2009, the rent prices weren't crazy. You could live in Dublin, and it wasn't going to cost you an arm and a leg, now it does. The difference in quality of life and the space a move out of the city affords you is quite something. But there's also the question of working from home and how that's going to impact the multinationals that are based in the city, because they are the main the catalysts of insane rental prices that have swept Dublin. I am hopeful that if that ecosystem stays permanently changed, it might also have a knock-on effect on the cost of renting because that's where artists are impacted immediately and directly in this situation. And the bonus, I suppose, isn't the small businesses closing – I really hope all of those shutters go up again – it's the big chains, the large outlets, those are the spaces that become really interesting playgrounds for artists in a city and in an economic crisis. So, the fingers are firmly crossed; there are things to be hopeful about, but we'll have to see how the chips will fall.

**Lian Bell**: The other thing that has a big potential is the announcement of a test run of universal basic income, using the arts as the testing ground. We don't know yet what that means. We don't know yet the scale of the test-case, but the idea is that some artists and arts workers would be supported with a small amount of money, regularly, to then do whatever they want to do, to produce work while having a bit of stability. Anyone you talk to who works in the arts, you can see their eyes just starting to glisten when you mention it, because everyone's just been thinking: "Oh my God, if I got that it would change my life." So, we're all crossing our fingers that the universal basic income test will happen in the arts and will then stay … It would be life-changing.

**Clare Wallace**: On that more optimistic note, let's draw this conversation to a close. Once again, thank you, Lian and Maeve, for a very stimulating sharing of experience and ideas about the interfaces and the artistic dialogues that shape their creative work, and we look forward to your next projects.

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