

You can't live on applause alone

Theatre-goers might imagine familiar actors live the high life, but a recent report should dispel that myth. **Peter Crawley** follows the low-money trail

On a damp Thursday afternoon at the beginning of this month, a large number of theatre practitioners gathered in the spacious rooms of the Arts Council while director Mary Cloake told them how poor they were. They seemed to take it well.

They had come for the launch of Socio-Economic Conditions of Theatre Practitioners in Ireland, a document that made for dismal reading. As Cloake recited some of the report's findings, heads nodded, lips tightened and a few rueful smiles were even chanced.

The statistics were cold and clear: 73 per cent of theatre practitioners have third-level qualifications, yet with just 20 weeks a year on average spent working in their specialist profession, unemployment is the norm. When unemployed, almost a quarter of theatre-makers had been required by Social Welfare to re-train or to apply for alternative jobs. The average weekly wage tallied at €513 when actors, playwrights, directors, producers, technicians and production managers were included in the survey, but restricted to just performers, it came to just €456.

The consequences snowballed: 43 per cent could not afford to take a holiday; 48 per cent had difficulty obtaining a mortgage and 34 per cent didn't try; more than half admitted they could barely make ends meet and, worryingly, only 29 per cent had a personal pension plan.

"There is a perception in Ireland that performing artists enjoy great celebrity, great wealth and privilege," Cloake said, and the room resonated with hollow laughter.

The report had been leaked, of course, but everyone present could already anticipate its findings. The average theatre artist may have been aware of the realities behind such means and medians, but with the average theatre artist being elsewhere, Olwen Fouéré managed to explain why, far from being nonplussed, the assembled theatre practitioners were entirely plussed.

"Most of the people in that room know the situation," Fouéré said, slipping away from the speakers' podium and circling trays of vol-au-vents. "But what we have discovered through our conversations with the Arts Council is that it's not really possible to lobby for change - particularly with State departments - until you've got facts like that. [Otherwise] it's all anecdotal. That's why the report was necessary."

Fouéré, one of the country's most active and visible stage actors, was representing Associated Theatre Artists (ATA), an organisation she co-founded with actor Jane Brennan in 2002. ATA was borne out of a highly politicised time for the theatre and the arts in general, when swingeing budget cuts hampered theatre activity in the country, and exacerbated the uncertainty of freelance artists who work within it. (This report estimates that there are 900 freelance theatre practitioners in the country, representing more than 80 per cent of the profession.)

If discussions of the report began with understanding conditions for the theatre sector as a whole, they swiftly moved to discussions about the inequality between actors and other theatre workers. In part, this is to do with the public visibility of the performer and the statistical confirmation that, in terms of remuneration, they are at the bottom of the pyramid. The further problem is a public delusion: just because you play the king doesn't mean you don't dine like a pauper.

"There is a misconception among the public," agrees Fouéré. "If you are very well known in theatre, and people see your name all the time, they're amazed at your level of income. For me, one of the central issues is that, in a way, we are invisible within the taxation system and within Social Welfare."

This may be one area where the Arts Council can effect a change. Such is the lack of understanding in Social Welfare that actors have reportedly been told to "get a real job" or, if they have appeared on TV, have had to explain that this does not make them rich.

The Arts Council is currently seeking a meeting with the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Seamus Brennan, to discuss better recognition of theatre practitioners in the Social Welfare system. One potential recommendation is for income smoothing - where taxable income is assessed not annually but over a period of years, allowing active years to balance the fallow ones.

Even that measure, however, is no guarantee of improving conditions.

"According to these figures," says Theatre Forum CEO Tania Banotti, "[theatre practitioners] are not at 42 per cent" - the higher rate of income tax - "so I'm not sure that smoothing will give them very much if they're not in the top tax bracket . . . The key thing is money. We've got to increase box office income, and we've got to increase public subsidy. Because if there is more money there, people will be paid more."

This may be true, in a roundabout way. The Arts Council funds theatre companies, not freelancers, and though the council does not advise companies on rates of pay, Banotti says theatre companies do pass it on to artists. "The majority of the spend on any show is on artistic fees," she insists.

However, increased funding may also mean that a company can produce more often, generating more work for playwrights, designers, technicians and actors. It's a nice idea, until you encounter another theatre deficit.

"The Arts Council funded a lot of productions this year," says Willie White, artistic director of Project Arts Centre, "but unfortunately there is not a lot of infrastructure to receive those productions."

Indeed, with the demise of the Crypt, THEatre SPACE and now the SFX as venues for performance in Dublin, the opportunities for employment could dwindle. Before box office figures can grow, there needs to be a box office. Talk of infrastructure, however, opens old wounds in theatre. Even now, there are sparkling regional arts

centres across the country, built with EU subsidies, praying for another tour of Alone It Stands to blow the cobwebs from their auditoria.

And the impression that a theatre company will tend to its fixed costs first - the rent, the bills, the administrator's salary - before turning to the variables - the play, the designers, the actors - still persists in certain quarters.

When actor and ATA co-founder Jane Brennan said she was "shocked but not surprised" by the report, you could understand why.

"The thing that shocked me," says Brennan, "was that performing artists were right at the bottom of the heap. We're not even on a par with the stage managers, it would appear. Seeing those facts and statistics in cold black and white, I could feel my hackles rising."

Brennan tends to make her points with good humour, aware that actors are usually slow to air their grievances. "You may have a poor livelihood," is how she characterises the usual position, "but if you make noises about it you may have no livelihood." When ATA was founded it quickly attracted a nickname: the Suicide Bombers. "People thought we were going to destroy our careers by being vocal about our lot," she recalls.

Coming from a family of actors, Brennan admits that she went into the business with her eyes open.

"I did know what the chances of 'making it' were, 'making it' being a relative term. But there was a pull towards it which I couldn't explain," she says.

Indeed, 79 per cent of theatre practitioners would do it all over again if they had to. Despite the straitened circumstances of their profession, eight out of 10 preferred it, considering the theatre a "vocation".

"That word should be abolished from our vocabulary," grimaces Brennan. "It's the same with nurses or primary school teachers - you can say they're all badly paid because they're 'vocations'. You're supposed to want to do it so much that you don't really have to be paid; that you get enough nourishment from the work."

The report, the first of its kind in Ireland, has prompted a rallying cry for cultural and economic change.

"You can't bring in changes until you know your base and what you're working from," said Arts Council chairwoman Olive Braiden.

"We must use this as a basis for change," insisted Fouéré.

"There has to be change both nationally and internationally," said Mary Cloake.

But when theatre work has been poorly paid since the dawn of the stage, and conditions for theatre artists seem no better globally, the battle seems to be with history, the fight with the world.

The report may have coincided with the Arts Council's final push to retain artists' tax exemptions (and prompted another vexed debate on the tax code's anachronistic distinction between "creative artists", such as writers, who qualify for exemption, and "interpretive artists", such as actors, who don't) but the stakes are higher than achieving political advantage.

Enid Reid Whyte, drama adviser to the Arts Council, recently attended another benefit thrown to raise cash for an Irish theatre actor in his senescence.

"We shouldn't have to be throwing benefits for national treasures," she winces. "This is Victorian stuff. This is not the 21st century."

She anticipates the emergence of a generation of actors without pension provision. But she still sounds a cautious note of optimism. "Ireland came up with Aosdána and tax exemptions for writers," she says. "Is there any reason why we have to be like the rest of the world in the way we handle performing artists? Can we change that too?"

It's imperative that we do. If the arts are valued, then they must be paid for. If the theatre has helped to give Ireland Inc its cultural sheen, it deserves recompense. Whether they are playwrights, directors, technicians, producers or actors, theatre-makers cannot live on applause alone.

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