

# LIVERPOOL IRISH FESTIVAL

#LIF2019

Unique stories, creatively told

## ARTISTIC STATEMENT

### Context

*Liverpool Irish Festival (LIF)* brings Liverpool and Ireland closer together using arts and culture.

It is this use of arts and culture as an instrument for observing, learning, sharing and debating Irishness, in the particular context of Liverpool, which makes us unique. We represent Northern Ireland, the Republic and the Irish diaspora's creativity throughout the festival. Our thematic approach to programming and critical-thought curation develops depth, resonance and inclusion. In this context, we believe the *Liverpool Irish Festival* is the only arts and culture led Irish festival in the world. We can't find another!

Sitting as part of a national calendar of cultural activity, the *Liverpool Irish Festival* contemplates the gamut of Irish culture, here in Liverpool, on the island and in the diaspora, also considering the cross-overs developing between disciplines. No other city has the same connection with the island of Ireland – proximity, longevity of migration, proportion of the population with Irish heritage – or demonstrates Irish influence on its fabric quite like Liverpool does. Even the kerbstones of some of our docks are made from Irish granite, imported from coastal Newry!

It is estimated that up to 75% of Liverpudlians are of close Irish descent, meaning the city plays host to a large diasporic community. The connections between music, port city life, religious, political and social evolutions are echoed in one another's psychosocial development and our music, dance, community groups and architectures share more than a passing resemblance. Indeed, it is understood that Irish influence is partly responsible for the Scouse accent and that there is something in our shared waters when it comes to the abundance of creativity issued from our collective shores and river banks.

*LIF's* ability to work with Liverpool, Liverpool Irish and Irish artists and communities, as well as those from the diaspora, means we are unlike other Irish festivals in Britain or around the world, many of which focus primarily on music and/or use St. Patrick's Day as their rallying call.

Our place within the city and national cultural ecology is not insignificant. As a recipient of City Council and Irish Embassy funding, we represent the public at large as well as discrete communities within it. Our work contributes to Liverpool's *Inclusive Growth plan*, the *Liverpool City Region Strategy* and the Irish government's *Diaspora Policy* via the *Emigrant Support Programme*. This is important to us as a kitemark, but as sincere recognition that Irishness is embedded here and that we are entrusted with providing high quality content to reveal the skill and creativity of its artistic community for all.

Our three major strands of work underpin these values, focusing on *In:visible Women*, *Family Days* and *Nook and Cranny Spaces*. "See the festival. See the city. Take your family".

Liverpool's distinctive genealogical, historic and geographical connections distinguishes *LIF* from those celebrated in London, Manchester or Glasgow (or international Irish communities in New York, Milwaukee and Belgrade!) and makes us a 'must visit' occasion for artists, tourism audiences, local communities and Irish commuters, as well as those with no connection, but an interest in one of the most creatively prolific countries in the world, in one of world's greatest cultural hotspots!

### Liverpool Irish Festival 2019/LIF2019 and themes

Each year the *Liverpool Irish Festival* sets a programme theme. Past themes have included, migration, the meaning of 'Irishness' and conviviality. To build the theme, we pose questions to help us question and learn about Irishness, its influence and its creative spirit.

#LIF2019's theme is "unique stories, creatively told". Questions we have posed include:

- Where and how are today's Irish stories being told and how are we protecting them for tomorrow?
- Where is the diaspora reflected in Irish creativity and how?
- What significant influences, if any, has Irish culture collected from around the world and how are they depicted? What stories do they tell?
- How reflective of a modern Irish person is the creative culture Ireland shows us today?
- Does 'Irishness' reflect the whole of Ireland or only certain parts and how is it perceived in non-Irish communities?
- What will Irish storytelling consist of in the future?

We are interested in hearing the unique and incredible stories of Irish people and the creative ways they are told. We want to share individual creative paths and how artists use their medium(s) to locate, interrogate and convey their identity, or other motivations that lay at the heart of what they do.

### Unique stories, creatively told

*Liverpool Irish Festival's* lived-experience of curating live Irish work –from Liverpool, Liverpool Irish and Irish artists (from all parts of the island and the diaspora)- suggests that 'contemporary work' retains considerable reference to 'trad'/traditional culture. In our experience, plays respond to the Easter Rising and Home Rule debates or the decade of centenaries; documentaries focus on centuries of institutional repressions; art works respond to turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century writers, etc.

From a curatorial position, we must question whether this is truly contemporary or whether we are missing the zeitgeist. If it is what is in production now, is it possible that this introspective stance is part of an Irish cultural phenomenon of re-examination? If so, where does this lead? How is this communicated? What are the effects of this today?

Additional questions arising include:

- Does a reliance on traditional Irish forms of expression supersede the new native cultures Irish people live in now and does this prevent 'Irishness' from interweaving or assimilating influences from host cultures into its fabric and forms of expression?
- What does the use of trad forms mean for the emergence of 21<sup>st</sup> century Irish forms, stories and mediums?
- Does it mean Ireland's creativity today won't be recognised as part of the arts firmament for another 100 years?
- Does introspection block contemporary creativity, forms and discourse?

### Cross-cultural matters

Elsewhere in the world, we see cultures merging and influencing one another. The organic embellishments of peace-time Victorian arts and crafts, later fuelled a stripped down simplicity within art deco in the interwar years. Influences from this period stretched to Bauhaus and constructivism, across Europe and America, informing abstraction and surrealism in art and cinema. We rarely see Irish abstract expressionism, which took America by storm in the 1950s and was played with by many European émigrés, but few of its Irish cohort. It is possible to suggest that, in broad terms, people have come to understand 'Irishness' through religious texts and actions; Celtic knot work; the *Book of Kells* and illuminated calligraphy; traditional music and a pantheon of 19th century writers – but what of today's artists?

Are Irish creatives making work to reflect 21<sup>st</sup> century Irish values, lived-experiences and identities or representing talents and histories of yesteryear?

As a contemporary curator, the *Liverpool Irish Festival* has been asking itself: why is our curatorial team not seeing references from diasporic life fuelling or influencing Irish visual arts? We might expect to see Indian influences on Irish missionary texts or Black Irish stories showing the history of Ireland's travel, but this doesn't seem to come in to our purview? Where are these impressions left within Irish visual culture and should we be able to find them? Where are the creative responses to today's stories about multi-ethnic marriages, families and times? Are we looking in the wrong places?

Whilst it could be argued that Ireland's 'popular music' is an area that -with its global references- has perhaps come the furthest, can we continue to see it as 'Irish' or does this contribution help to form an international

hybrid of music that comes from everywhere and nowhere? We continue to question whether music speaks of (or to) generic Western values, created by the First World's access to music or if specific cultural conditions that shaped its content, form and appeal?

Our direct work with today's artists, musicians, writers and cultural producers has suggested that Ireland's consistent struggle to defend its culture against oppressors -throughout history- has led to a tendency to hold culture in stasis. This is not necessarily negative. This act is almost a subversive, 'rebellion' story of its own, which keeps nostalgia, history and community together and it could be argued that this is what art is for. However, is it possible that by doing this, that rather than progressing the forms and advancing in to new territory Irish visual arts culture now fails to question the past, but standardises it for everyone?

### **New narratives and their impact**

Very recently, we have started to see an emergence of Irish 'realism' in film and TV with programmes such as *The Young Offenders* and *Cardboard Gangsters*. This could be seen as a progression, perhaps, from some of Ireland's 19/20<sup>th</sup> century writing, such as Flann O'Brien, whose works often satirised the poverty Ireland's poor were subjected to. These depictions move the story away from the ruralism of the Emerald Isle, taking you to urban car parks and the concrete foundations of a new future. What does this new realism (or brutalism) reveal? How do these stories speak to the Irish diaspora?

The unearthing of Ireland's internal, long held secrets including the Magdalene Laundries; systematic abuses within church systems; stigmas and abuses of female bodies are all controversial topics, but artistic expression and representation is starting to come through and challenge the notion that these secrets remain "at the level of story rather than history"\* , with films such as with *Philomena* (2013), *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *The Devil's Doorway* (2018) casting their spotlight on collective traumas. By bringing these stories in to the light, presenting the narrative in new ways and allowing people to process them as part of their cultural heritage, identity and future perhaps we can transform 'story' in to 'history'.

### **The LIF product**

Whilst the *Liverpool Irish Festival* cannot provide all of the answers to these questions, identity issues or form expressions, we can present a programme of works that helps us to raise them, explore the ideas and create discourse.

We can provide spaces in which people can meet and talk about what they have witnessed in this work, how they respond to the work and/or why they have created and produced it. We talk about these issues using art, dance, discussion, family activities, film, music, shared participation, song and more besides. We can –and do– invite you to join us and celebrate stories, art and expression, with us, in this city full of Irish influence, history and culture. We encourage you to share it with friends and family; enjoy it for its creative passion and skill; feed in to the collective story using our hashtags and to feedback to us in person and using our surveys. You form part of the ongoing story of exchange and community growth. #LIF2019 carries on a strong tradition of sharing stories and creative energies and, all being well, will encourage you back for #LIF2020.

\* James M Smith, *Magdalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*

## **HOW DO YOU GET INVOLVED?**

If you have an idea for the *Liverpool Irish Festival*, we would love to hear from you, but before you say "I want..", "I'm Irish..." or "I have an idea...", we will need answers to all of the following questions.

### **What do you need from the festival to realise your idea?**

**Funds and space:** We are publicly funded and consequently anything we pay for must be for the public good and not a commercial endeavour. So if it is money, we will need to see a draft budget and how much of it you expect LIF to provide you with. You will need to be prepared for us to need to venture in to a joint fundraising programme, because our funds are limited and as a charity we will not fund a commercial enterprise. Ideas that pay for themselves are great, but they will still need to meet the challenges of the theme and we will still want to see how it will work, along with the other conditions below. As a venueless organisation, we will need to work in partnership with our friends, colleagues and city venues to find programme space. Don't just assume we can do this. If you need us to find you a venue tell us.

We will need to understand if you expect us to pay and/or split:

- Artist fees
- Travel accommodation
- Per diems
- Materials
- Ticket income
- Technical fees and staffing

...and, if so, whether you will contribute anything to *LIF*.

**Who is it for and how many people?** You need to tell us how many people you think will engage with your work. If you are putting on a gig or performance, how many people would your work most suit? We're not just looking to engage the most people, we want to understand what scale of event you are proposing and how the audience is affected by the nature of the work. We also need to understand whether it is appropriate for all ages or whether there is a guidance rating for the work. We're not expecting official ratings, but an understanding of the main audience for your work may help us locate the right space, time and support system for it. If it has challenging content, don't hang back from telling us – we are interested in taking risk, but want to support the work accordingly. If it is not – or is wholly - appropriate for children, please state as much.

If you have ordinarily ticketed your events, please tell us what price you have ticketed at, where and when. The festival really wants to work with content that has not been shown locally or – at least- in close (time) proximity to the festival.

**How does the work tie to the theme?** Content is the supreme ruler! We believe we have provided a broad, but interesting and resonant brief. We need to know how you aim to respond to or meet it – tell us how you will or think you already do. It might not be obvious (it doesn't have to be), but in order for us to situate your work, draw it in to thematic strands of *#LIF2018* and truly collaborate with you, it is important you tell us. Expect us to be thinking about how we can introduce you to other artists and anchor work together that shares subject matter or offers counter ideas.

*LIF* is not just a badging exercise to assist with promotions. It is a producing festival that commits to taking risk, bringing new content to audiences and dynamising interest in Irish contemporary practice, whilst celebrating tradition. We are keen to create narratives that draw people in to your work, so thinking about stories that could be issued in advance of the work such as photo journals and social media stories, that bring audiences closer and drive conversation about aspects of your work, are really important to us.

What else can we do with you to generate additional interest? Ideas might include: short films, rehearsal diaries, journals, tour essays, photo stories, podcasts and interviews, Q&As following or during your performance or exhibition... We don't just put things on – we want to drive conversation, tell stories and create interactions with the work. How do you help us via the theme or this additional content?

**What kind of technical set up/support will you require?** Will you be bringing this with you and does it form part of the overall fee? If not, what will you need and who do you expect to secure and pay for the services? How is it built in to the overall budget and profit split?

**Do you know us?** The *Liverpool Irish Festival* has existed since 2003. Our team has changed over 15 years of life. Please tell us if you have worked with us before, in what capacity and when (roughly). We hope to carry stories forward, but we are not all knowing, so may need your help with this. It's not senility – honest – but changes to our Board, leadership and structure mean we may need you to remind us!

## WHAT NOW?

**The vision is more important than the approach.** Whilst we will need to establish all of the above, the most important part of your proposal is the vision and core ideals. It doesn't have to look good or have everything dotted and crossed. Your approach need only be informal and email based initially. Please don't spend time or money on expensive layouts, elaborate R&D or 'smoke blowing'. A great idea, with an understanding of its needs may take us some time to execute, but it will be heard and if we believe it has merit and can provide audiences with interesting content, we will want to work with you to execute it. Be professional, but don't let fear, complexity or money stand in the way of a good vision.

**Ready?** So, you've got all your answers and bucked yourself up to submit your idea? Great. Send it to [info@liverpoolirishfestival.com](mailto:info@liverpoolirishfestival.com) Please note that outside festival delivery, *LIF* only runs a small, part-time team and it may take a little while to come back to you. Please be patient – we will do what we can to reply as quickly as we can.