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## International perspectives on cross-border working

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### Summary:

*This paper provides an international perspective on cross-border working and reflects on the policy frameworks which promote cross-border working through the lens of the Belfast International Arts Festival. It suggests that Brexit will impact artist mobility, funding, and market competition in the arts and proposes that the most urgent issue is the potential of Brexit to dismantle the complex and multi-layered notions of identity in Northern Ireland and how we articulate our common European heritage.*

**Key words: International; Collaboration; Belfast International Arts Festival; Brexit; European Identity**

### Introduction

The Belfast International Arts Festival (formerly known as the Belfast Festival at Queens) was reconstituted in 2015 as an independent company and registered charity away from Queen's University Belfast, which had been its host for over fifty years. Its new remit placed significant value on the importance of global connectivity, community, access and participation and contemporary arts practice. In doing so it would attempt to involve, to a greater degree, communities across the city and not just those based in South Belfast as was largely the case in the past. Central to this new remit was an acknowledgment of the important role that arts and culture could play in promoting reconciliation, tolerance and understanding across the island and as a consequence of the Good Friday Agreement (1998). Consequently, since 2013 – my first year as artistic director – the festival has actively sought to regularly commission, produce and present projects and events that

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involve artists and communities from across the border and to specifically address issues such as cultural identity, human rights and social justice.

### **Belfast International Arts Festival and Cross-Border Working**

Throughout its fifty-seven year history, the Belfast International Arts Festival (the Festival) has faced serious curatorial and operational challenges. In the 1970s and 1980s in particular, these often centered on the event's capacity to attract leading artists to the war-torn city of Belfast. In recent years, the nature of those challenges has changed significantly to reflect both new economic hardships (as a result of government austerity policies) and the need for the event to connect more meaningfully with its constituencies across a city that was rapidly changing in the wake of the Belfast Agreement (1998). Those challenges still exist today but have been compounded by the very real damage that the United Kingdom's (UK) exit from the European Union, known as Brexit, could inflict on cultural relations across the island of Ireland.

The origins of our own cross-border relationships in respect of the Festival include for example, specific policy frameworks that on the macro level include the aforementioned Good Friday Agreement (1998) and Creative Europe, the European Union (EU) wide programme for promoting and funding culture with a budget of €1.46 billion from 2014-2020 (and which the Festival heavily benefited from in 2012/2013 and again in 2015, when it contributed some €150,000 to that year's budget). Others have also been specifically supported through the EU's PEACE III Programme.

The strategic objectives of several of our public funders also emphasise the importance of cross-border relations. For example, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Arts Council Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) have provided funding for cross-border touring across a range of art forms and arts practices. The two arts councils now co-support a joint touring scheme, [Beyond Borders](#), with Creative Scotland and

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Arts Council of Wales. Festival presentations in recent years by several ROI based artists and ensembles have only been possible through support from these shared funds including for example CoisCéim's [The Wolf and Peter](#) (2015) and Timmy Creed's virtuoso stage work, [Spliced](#) scheduled for October 2019. Whilst Belfast City Council's (2019) latest draft for a 10 year cultural strategy does not specifically mention cross-border relations, this is hopefully implicit in proposed priorities promoting cultural diversity and cultural tourism (with ROI being a major market for short breaks to NI) as well as placing them within a greater international context.

The Government of Ireland also recognises the importance of cross-border cultural relations and particularly as a key aspect of its [Decade of Centenaries](#) programme, which aims to commemorate the significant events in Irish history that took place between 1912 and 1922. It has, in recent years, provided valuable financial support for specific Festival commissions and events both through the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs / An Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreachta, Gnóthaí Réigiúnacha, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade/An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála. In 2016 with the assistance of the Government of Ireland, we presented a series of performances and talks that explored the impacts of the Great War on the international system and specifically for the independence movement in Ireland. This included a very special event at the Grand Opera House in Belfast titled, [The Fever: Roger Casement In The Dark Places](#) (Fintan O'Toole, Olwen Fouéré Crash Ensemble with Robin Adams and Matthew Hargreaves). Performances included *The Dark Places* a new work by Colm Tóibín, and acclaimed composer Donnacha Dennehy performed by Crash Ensemble together with *The Nightmare of Empire/The Dream of Europe* by Fintan O'Toole performed by celebrated actress Olwen Fouéré. The evening also featured the premiere of a new short dramatic work by Fintan O'Toole, specially commissioned by Belfast International Arts Festival and concluded

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with an extraordinary dramatic monologue written for Roger Casement, a diplomat for the British Foreign Office who later became a an activist and leader of the Easter Rising, by the most famous playwright of the day, George Bernard Shaw. This was a speech Shaw hoped to persuade Casement, who was facing the death sentence for treason, to deliver at his own trial. Shaw believed it would persuade the jury to spare Casement's life. *Treason on Trial* had not previously been heard on stage in the UK until the Belfast International Arts Festival decided to address this as part of its continuing commitment to encourage a public discourse promoting a greater appreciation of cultural diversity, tolerance and reconciliation through creative practice.

Similar objectives informed a more recent commission in 2018 of [Across and In-Between](#) by renowned American visual and social practice artist Suzanne Lacy. Created in collaboration with communities in Ireland from both sides of the border, *Across and In-Between* explores the profound impact the border has on the lives of people who live there. The project is in two parts, *The Yellow Line* and the [Border People's Parliament](#). *The Yellow Line* is a three-screen film projection made with participants including farmers, horse-owners, scouts, hikers and villagers from communities across the Fermanagh, Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan border-line and was projected upon the front of the Ulster Museum over a six-day run in October 2018, supported by a temporary exhibition featuring documentary interviews. The *Border People's Parliament* was a private event in Stormont's Parliament Buildings for the participants in the project and through celebrating their involvement in making *The Yellow Line*, they created a border people's parliament, a space where border voices were able to consider matters of global political significance that are also, to them, intensely local. This event resulted in the publication of [The Yellow Manifesto](#), summarising their beliefs and hopes for the future. *Across and In-Between* was only made possible by

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co-commissioning support from both 14-18 NOW World War 1 Centenary Art Commissions and the Government of the Republic of Ireland.

It is worth mentioning here the generous and sympathetic role that [14-18 NOW](#) played not only in supporting the Festival but other specific arts events across Northern Ireland. This was the UK's arts programme for the First World War centenary. Working with arts and heritage partners all across the UK, they commissioned and supported new artworks from 420 contemporary artists, musicians, film makers, designers and performers, inspired by the period 1914-18. This programme provided a unique context and indeed source of alternative funding for the Festival to continue its exploration of cultural diversity, tolerance and inclusivity and particularly in respect of the entire island.

Like the Government of the Republic of Ireland, [14-18 NOW](#) completely understood the sensitivities surrounding this period of history in respect of Ireland and as such worked alongside them to support the Festival's approach to working inclusively with communities across the city. Whilst jointly supporting the aforementioned events, they separately supported other events that more closely aligned with their own specific policy objectives including the Festival's co-commission of Taylor Mac's [A 24-Decade History of Popular Music: The WW1 Years and More in 2016](#); our presentation of both a group exhibition featuring contemporary interpretations of women's fashion during the Great War years called [Fashion and Freedom](#) (Darrell Vydelingum, Dr Miles Lambert and Jenna Rossi-Camus), and the iconic ceramic installation, [Poppies: Weeping Window](#) (Tom Piper and Paul Cummins) both in 2017 and all three solely supported by 14-18 NOW. For their part, the Government of Ireland provided generous financial support for Fearghus Ó Conchúir's dance work [Butterflies & Bones: The Casement Project](#) in 2016 and Hughie O'Donoghue's spectacular exhibition, [The Tempest: Ireland; Memory; Identity](#) in 2017. It is cross border support that has made this work possible. The Festival's core funding is simply insufficient to

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commission, deliver and present projects of this nature and scale. Without the additional and significant investment from both 14-18 NOW and the Government of the Republic of Ireland, none of these projects would have been possible.

### Future Challenges

At the time of writing, Brexit has been rescheduled for 31 October 2019 and occurs at a critical juncture for the arts and cultural sector throughout the island of Ireland as it slowly emerges from over a decade of austerity. Funding cuts for the arts and cultural sector in Northern Ireland have been particularly severe. Against this backdrop it is even more remarkable that Northern Ireland's arts and cultural sector has continued to not only maintain some semblance of activity but has also been able to both nurture some notable local talents such as dance maker, [Oona Doherty](#) and to promote new infrastructural initiatives including for example, rebuilding and consequent revitalization of the Lyric Theatre and MAC Arts Centre.

However, Brexit not only threatens this fragile recovery but also potentially jeopardises future cross-border collaborations and programmes as well as excluding Northern Irish artists and cultural institutions from EU cultural initiatives. Belfast and Derry / Londonderry's joint bid for European Capital of Culture in 2023 quickly became ineligible as a result of the Brexit referendum (Irish Times, 2017).

All of the aforementioned cross-border projects reflect the deep and long standing relationships that I built up over many years with artists and institutions across the island. In a previous life, I was managing director of the Abbey Theatre and thereafter the Government of Ireland's Commissioner for a major cultural exchange with China. I still live in Dublin but am fortunate to work in Belfast for the Festival. More than that though, the Festival – like most leading cultural institutions – has an identity and vision that principally reflects

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the beliefs and values of its chief curator and/or chief executive and, in this respect, the Belfast International Arts Festival is no different. My personal vision has always been of a twenty-first -century Ireland that embraces and celebrates its Irishness, with its increasingly multi-layered cultural identities, secure in the knowledge that this is not only good for society across the island but also allows us to play a full and meaningful role as global citizens, that is, encouraging ourselves and our fellow citizens to be more aware of and understanding of the wider world within which we live and to take an active role within our communities to make our world more equal, fair and sustainable.

From my first festival programme in 2013 through to the present day, you will find many events that celebrate and explore this vision with like-minded artists from across the island and indeed from further afield as well. Practically speaking, programming cross-border collaborations of the scale and nature discussed in this piece rely heavily on an ongoing dialogue between artists and the Festival, sometimes formal but often informal. Whilst it is widely understood in the arts and culture sector that the Festival is a strictly curated event without open calls for proposals, we do encourage artists to keep us apprised of their forthcoming creation, production and exhibition plans. Moreover, there are several more established artists who we also use as a sounding board to help us to identify key emerging artists that we may wish to work with in the future. Certain key professional showcases and platforms also provide useful indications not only of current repertoire but also of works that may be in development to be realised at a future date. In the Republic of Ireland, the Dublin Fringe Festival, Dublin Theatre Festival and Dublin Dance Festival all have important showcases of new stage works. There are sadly fewer such showcases in Northern Ireland, despite the Festival's ongoing, but to date failed, efforts to persuade its stakeholders of the value of investing in a similar approach for our own event. Credit therefore to Prime Cut Productions whose annual [Reveal-Ed](#) programme provides a

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valuable showcase opportunity for Northern Irish theatre and dance artists.

### **Conclusion**

In the meantime, the potential impact of Brexit on cross-border cultural relations and artistic collaborations continues to preoccupy many artists and cultural institutions. Will the mobility of artists and artworks across the Irish border be hindered or restricted? How likely is it that the UK Treasury will boldly step-up to invest in arts institutions that previously received capital grants from the EU, and in our own case, funding from the Creative Europe programme? Will the government policy continue to financially support free entry into major museums? How will international programmes like our own cope with currency fluctuations and the worsening euro/sterling rate? A perhaps more urgent issue is how to prevent Brexit dismantling complex and multi-layered notions of identity in Northern Ireland fostered over many years, and a return to a more simplistic, black and white viewpoint based solely on national allegiance. In the same vein, how will Brexit affect how we see and articulate our common European heritage? And will this shared European heritage, nurtured over 70 years of vital cultural networks – both formal and informal – be diminished, thereby impacting upon our ability to attract the best minds to Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom to contribute to our cultural life?

These are vital questions that artists and cultural institutions across Ireland are addressing, often through creative programmes and projects such as the examples given earlier. Incidentally, there are some aspects of cultural life on the island that will not change if Brexit happens. In recent years, a central theme for the Festival has been to explore how cultures can maintain an identity despite permeable and changing borders. Connections spread constantly, and artistic ideas travel especially fast and frequently ignore any notion of borders. Arguably, the core creativity of artists working on the island

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will not disappear post any Brexit, and moreover, does not require any special deals.

Brexit could also conceivably lead to a recalibration of UK - Irish cultural bonds with—some think—the emergence of Northern Ireland as the main bridge between the UK, Ireland and possibly Europe. A potential opportunity, or an unrealistic expectation?

As a bare minimum, cultural workers on both sides of the border will expect the same freedom to travel to, and work in both jurisdictions post Brexit. A memorandum of agreement preserving the Common Travel Area (CTA) between Ireland and the UK after Brexit was signed by the Irish and UK governments earlier in the year. Although a non-legally binding understanding at the time of writing this article, it, for example, allows cross-border access to education and healthcare, and provides some comfort to artists wishing to travel to, and work across the Irish Sea. However, with the continued absence of devolved government for Northern Ireland and consequent lack of local political decision making, it is hard to see how other crucial issues for NI artists and cultural organisations, such as access to European funding post Brexit, can be adequately addressed in the limited amount of time left to 31<sup>st</sup> October. So much of Northern Ireland's future continues to therefore hinge on the reinstatement of the NI Assembly. Without it, there is little political motivation, for example for the Arts Councils on either side of the border to consider and introduce meaningful measures – properly resourced by their respective governments – that not only underpin but build on cultural relations across the island.

There are other ways too to support enhanced cross border working in respect of arts and culture, including;

- A move towards developing an all island cultural economy that sees for example, greater strategic emphasis by the two Arts Councils on

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the island to enable more cross border touring and joint commissioning and producing of new works.

- Support for cultural organisations and institutions to build capacity and knowledge of the nature and scope of artistic practice across the island
- Training in arts disciplines remains underdeveloped in NI in particular. There is an opportunity to partially address this gap through increased co-operation between the various third level institutions across the island, providing young people greater access to diversity of education and training in the arts. Such links would not only involve facilitating greater cross border mobility by students but also closer collaboration between university and higher education departments across Ireland to produce a complimentary set of courses that are both genuinely accessible and inspirational in creating the next generation of contemporary artists.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 in Section 10 (2) (a) *Continuation of North-South co-operation and the prevention of new border arrangements* states that

Nothing in section 8, 9 or 23(1) or (6) of this Act authorises regulations which—diminish any form of North-South cooperation provided for by the Belfast Agreement (as defined by section 98 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998),

Hopefully, this inclusion not only requires that the Northern Ireland backstop will stay in place until MPs reach an agreement that honours the UK's obligations under the Good Friday Agreement (1998), but that it also allows the cultural sector across the island to map out a new future that respects and constructively builds on the status quo. In any event, Belfast International Arts Festival will continue to work positively with those of a like mind to ensure we

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play our role in ensuring good cultural relationships across the island, irrespective of the outcome of Brexit.

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