

## Perspectives on Practice:

### Converting Advocacy to Action: #WakingTheFeminists Legacy

OLWEN DAWE

#### **Summary:**

This piece explores the catalytic effect of the voluntary #WakingtheFeminists movement, sparked in late 2015 by the announcement of the Abbey Theatre's 'Waking the Nation' 2016 commemorative centenary programme.

#### **Abstract:**

In late 2015, gender inequality in Irish theatre came centre-stage, following the public announcement of the Abbey Theatre's 'Waking the Nation' 2016 commemorative centenary programme. As the Irish state's national theatre, this announcement was intended as a commemoration of one hundred years since the founding through uprising of the Irish state and thus symbolic of the state of contemporary Irish theatre. Featuring just one play written by a female playwright (and few other female creatives), its announcement triggered an online debate on social media. This moment catalysed a far wider debate. Here, Olwen Dawe reflects on a moment that gave rise to a movement, and how a voluntary group of artists and practitioners mobilised and strategised, garnering substantial engagement from the theatre community, policymakers and media, and developing a nationwide (and international) following in the process. In addition, she tracks the impact of #WakingTheFeminist's advocacy campaign for gender equality in theatre, almost five years since the inception of the movement and as the deadline approaches of its target: 50:50 by November 2020.

**Key words: #WakingTheFeminists; Abbey Theatre; Gender equality; Arts policy**

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## Introduction

This November it will be five years since the issue of gender equality and female representation in Irish theatre landed squarely in the sightlines of the theatre community, the public and the media. A grassroots campaign whose origins emanated from the Abbey Theatre's 2016 'Waking the Nation' commemorative centenary programme, #WakingTheFeminists grew from a hashtag to a movement in the space of a few short weeks. While the Abbey Theatre's 2016 programme acted as a catalyst for foregrounding the issue of gender equality in theatre, it quickly became clear that this was a more widespread and engrained cultural challenge and required a collaborative, concerted and cohesive response. Bringing a sector together to interrogate, understand and resolve issues of underrepresentation, systemic bias and cultural norms may seem an ambitious (or implausible) approach to take. So, has it worked?

The movement's stated goal of 50:50 by 2020 means this year provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the group's advocacy agenda, and how it developed from an online community to an influential force for change. For me, as someone who worked on a number of initiatives arising from #WakingTheFeminists campaign, it is clear that their advocacy has had a substantial impact, on the theatre community, its decision-making and on relevant public policy, but is there more to be done?

This article looks back at a key contemporary moment in Irish theatre that reawakened and reenergised debate about access, opportunity and equality; how a voluntary movement organised itself to respond to this debate, and how the theatre community limbered up to tackle a challenge they had to solve.

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## Background

In late 2015, gender inequality in Irish theatre came centre-stage, following the public announcement of the Abbey Theatre's 'Waking the Nation' 2016 commemorative centenary programme. As the Irish state's national theatre, this season announcement was intended as a mark of commemoration of one hundred years since the founding through uprising of the Irish state. It could be seen therefore to carry significance beyond a single season in a single building but symbolic of the state of Irish theatre in this significant year. Featuring just one play written by a female playwright (and few female creatives represented within the programme), its announcement triggered an online debate on social media. Leading to exchanges between many individuals, the then head of the Abbey Theatre and a range of others, the speed and fury at the marginalization of women took many by surprise. This moment catalysed a far wider-reaching conversation which continues to reverberate.

For many members of the public, the notion of the arts (and in particular theatre) being at the heart of such a controversy about inequality, seemed surprising. As a conduit for societal narrative, a mirror of sorts to contemporary and historical issues, this debate seemed at odds with this ethos. However, as the #WakingTheFeminists campaign gathered momentum, the real and substantial inequalities at work within theatre and across other artistic communities became more apparent and more public. A wholly voluntary campaign started on social media in 2015 and culminating in a final event at the Abbey Theatre in November 2016 (entitled #OneThingMore) one year on, the #WakingTheFeminists advocacy movement sought to advance change across a range of key issues facing women in theatre. Supported by social media activity, a swathe of committed volunteer activists, and a (mainly) supportively inquisitive media, the group's impact remains a regular topic of conversation for organisations and individuals working within the arts.

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Their success in placing equality for women squarely on the agendas of the theatre community, policymakers and politicians, the media and wider public, at home and abroad, is unquestionable. However, their efforts were strategic and substantial, underpinned by clarity and commitment.

### **Catalysing Change: #WakingTheFeminists Strategy**

In the immediate aftermath of the initial catalysing social media discussion, it became clear that a timely and important conversation had started; one that had been bubbling under the surface for quite some time and was now being given voice. The #WakingTheFeminists hashtag had quickly become a shared space where female artists from across the arts could articulate their experiences; experiences of inequality, of deliberate silencing, of being 'fired from the canon' (Keating, 2015). The themes emerging highlighted a real need to bring people together.

A public event, held at the Abbey Theatre, took place within a matter of weeks of the initial outburst in 2015, providing a platform for open dialogue and experience sharing. This event also made it clear to many of those involved that #WakingTheFeminists had ignited a discussion that demanded action, and it was now a case of deciding how best to harness this momentum in order to achieve concrete outcomes.

Speaking about this period of time, Lian Bell, one of the key architects of #WakingTheFeminists suggested that:

it became clear that this movement was bigger than me – it was also bigger than theatre – and for a while became hugely overwhelming. It was clear we had to just focus on our own area [theatre] as #WakingTheFeminists was bigger than the Abbey... it indicated a wider social and cultural statement... the culture we live in.

As a group of voluntary activists, with limited time and resources but plenty of goodwill, focus and commitment, #WakingTheFeminists needed to organise.

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This required a decisive and clear approach to maximising the impact of their advocacy, ensuring they pursued a set of key goals rather than seeking to address every issue possible. A core group of twelve volunteers (from a wider group of thirty or more) was brought together by Lian Bell; spanning producers, writers, directors, actors, choreographers, technicians, programmers, artists and audience members. Led by Lian, as Campaign Director, the core and wider voluntary organising groups of #WakingTheFeminists came into being as an advocacy movement. In acknowledging both the opportunities and constraints of the situation, it was decided that a set of definite objectives would be put in place — all with a specific focus on achieving gender equality in theatre. A manifesto followed ('Equality for Women in Irish Theatre'), with a website (WakingTheFeminists.org) setting out three core objectives for every publicly-funded theatre:

1. A sustained policy for inclusion with action plan and measurable results;
2. Equal championing and advancement of women artists;
3. Economic parity for all working in the theatre.

While the campaign's objectives sought to specifically target all publicly funded theatre-making, the movement also aimed to champion issues of gender equality across the sector (both funded and unfunded). The campaign would run for a year, continuing vital dialogue across the sector, championing change and building consensus, and was built around three core planks of activity: raising awareness, influencing government and policy and building data and evidence.

What followed was a series of open discussions, active social media campaigning, media engagement, public and private meetings with stakeholders from both the theatre world and policymakers connected to theatre and the arts. It was an evolutionary process and one which in many

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respects, was led by the sector in response to the movement. As a group of volunteers, the team behind #WakingTheFeminists found the groundswell of interaction a driving force for their activity. Indeed, Lian points to this reality by noting that at the outset,

everything came after the fact... there was no [initial] plan. We had a lot of good people, from across the sector in the room – we had to focus on what we could legitimately do.

Over the course of its year-long campaign, #WakingTheFeminists became a national movement with off-shoots springing up around the country (and internationally). The core group of #WakingTheFeminists assembled three key national events, one in November 2015 (following the founding of the group), an International Women's Day Event and a further public event on the one-year anniversary of their founding in November 2016. The group did not establish a legal entity right away, but did so at a later stage in order to support the Gender Counts research project.

### **Media and Public Awareness**

By virtue of its voluntary, grassroots-led approach, however, #WakingTheFeminists galvanised individuals and collectives to self-organise, hosting events and talks and joining in online through social media. On Nollaig na mBan (Women's Christmas, an Irish tradition based on the epiphany), 6th January 2016, over fourteen individual gatherings took place around Ireland (and overseas) as part of a 'call-out' issued by #WakingTheFeminists to their supporters. Momentum built quickly in a short period, with prominent celebrities (including Hollywood stars Meryl Streep and Christine Baranski) sharing their support for the movement online, providing additional heft to the campaign in the eyes of many stakeholders including the theatre community, the public and the media.

The media's predisposition towards the movement was noteworthy; with over ninety separate media outlets covering stories related to the group and its

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agenda. This may have been attributable to the general curiosity concerning the Abbey Theatre within media circles, or perhaps the interconnections of timing (the centenary of the Easter Rising and its complex expression of the nation and also 2016 being the final programme of the Abbey Theatre's outgoing director, Fiach Mac Conghail). It could also be attributed to social media's catalytic momentum-building nature. According to Lian, this favourable engagement was crucial to the campaign's success with the media's positive support actively promoting and validating #WakingTheFeminists' stance, and publications such as the Irish Times featuring fifteen separate articles. Lian said,

the fact that the media was so positive towards the movement made a huge difference... it was like everyone was saying "obviously, yes of course!". We were concerned that people would push back and disprove everything we were saying, but it never happened.

### Government and Policy

The positive media coverage of #WakingTheFeminists advocacy, helped to add to the substantial wave of public awareness and engagement, paving the way for advocacy within government decision-making, a fact which Lian acknowledges mainly centred on the Arts Council,

'In the first instance, our interaction needed to be with the Arts Council; it was very important to keep them informed and bought-in'.

As the authority which oversees the vast majority of arts policy implementation, ensuring the Arts Council was connected to the evolution of the movement was of central importance – and also assisted #WakingTheFeminists in securing some funding towards their planned activities.

Though financial resourcing was not a chief concern for the group at the outset, it became apparent that funding would be required, in order to

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undertake research as a necessary part of the campaign's evidence-making, and add weight to the call for policy change. In addition, the ambition to run larger events also needed resource. While initial analysis had indicated a paucity of work by women, as well as few female directors and a lack of equal representation in casting, in order to fully evidence the issues #WakingTheFeminists were raising a robust academic analysis would need to happen.

Funding was obtained via the Arts Council, specifically for academic research and the development of a gender equality programme for theatre companies; while the Community Foundation provided grant-aid to support ancillary and event costs. The total of this support amounted to €32,000. The Irish Government's 1916/2016 fund provided a donation of €5,000 towards the final #WakingTheFeminists event, noting its resonance to the commemoration itself. Apart from these sources, members of the public and theatre community provided small donations, and at the outset, Lian commented that most support was in-kind donation. Throughout the duration of the movement's one-year tenure, its structure for delivery and management remained unpaid and voluntary.

On the movement's one-year anniversary, #WakingTheFeminists had achieved a core tenet of its mandate and objectives, building awareness and recognition of the gender equality issues within its community. It had successfully drawn attention to these issues and their impact among the makers and producers of theatre, and to both organisations and individuals involved. But those at the core of the movement also recognised that work would need to continue to achieve considerable policy change. This was necessary to make the theatre community itself accountable for observing this change and implementing new ways of producing and commissioning work. As had been set out in #WakingTheFeminists objectives, policies and processes would be necessary to safeguard the progress made.

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## Data and Building Evidence

Utilising the funding attained from the Arts Council, the group appointed three academics, Dr Brenda Donohue, Dr Tanya Dean, and Dr Ciara O'Dowd, to undertake an analysis of the gender breakdown across the top ten funded theatre organisations, over a ten year-period (2006-2015). The analysis would outline, evidentially, the reality of gender representation in theatre over ten years, establishing links between public funding to theatre and gender inequality.

The research entitled *Gender Counts: An analysis of gender in Irish theatre 2006-15* (Donohue *et al.*, 2017<sup>i</sup>) would be unveiled at the one-year anniversary event #OneThingMore, with a private meeting conducted afterwards with producers and organisations to discuss the findings and plan for organisational policy change.

The decision to conclude the campaign after one year was deliberate; the voluntary organising group knew that it would not be possible for them to continue to manage the organisation into the future, and also felt their job had been done. An online conversation had led to a movement, which had built awareness and generated a willingness to explore change. Now it was time to give that responsibility back to the theatre community, and its policymakers.

## The Impact

Just months after the one-year anniversary event, the then Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Heather Humphreys TD, hosted a gender equality workshop with members of #WakingTheFeminists and representatives of National Cultural Institutions (a designation for key national cultural organisations, see: <https://www.chg.gov.ie/arts/culture/cultural-institutions/>) to discuss their approaches to the issues raised during the campaign. Minister Humphreys also requested that all institutions would have

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gender equality policies in place by 2018 (Dervan, 2017). This timeline was to coincide with another historic milestone: the centenary of women's suffrage, which was granted to some though not all women in Ireland, in 1918. The Ministerial request highlighted a crucial acknowledgement of the issues of representation, access and opportunity raised by #WakingTheFeminists' advocacy at Government level.

By June 2017, the research report *Gender Counts* (Donohue *et al.*, 2017) was launched. Its findings highlighted a series of trends; some that had previously been considered anecdotal, others that pointed to engrained biases and norms. Of the most stark patterns within the report, was the fact that the four highest-funded organisations had the lowest female representation, and in general, the report noted 'an inverse relationship between levels of funding and female representation... in other words, the higher the funding an organisation receives, the lower the female presence' (Donohue *et al.*, 2017, p.7).

Having presented this clear evidence to the theatre community, it was then for them (and particularly organisations) to respond with a plan. The Gender Equality Policy Working Group had been established following #WakingTheFeminists final event in November 2016 (#OneThingMore). This group consisted of ten theatre professionals representing the breadth of the sector (a festival, the National Theatre, producing companies of different sizes and an educational institution) with the objective of working together to devise their own individual policy responses. Meeting quarterly, the group provided time and space for those involved to candidly discuss various approaches, solutions and ultimately, decide upon the best policy for each member.

In July 2018, the Gender Equality Policy Working Group published its policies at an official launch in the Lir Academy (Falvey, 2018). The Abbey had

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formulated its 8 Guiding Principles on Gender Equality in 2016 (RTE, 2016). This event and the publication of the gender equality policies of 10 major theatre and arts organisations of the working group (Abbey Theatre, Druid Theatre Company, Dublin Theatre Festival, the Everyman Theatre, Rough Magic Theatre Company, Corn Exchange Theatre Company, the Gate Theatre, Cork Midsummer Festival, Fishamble Theatre Company and the Lir Academy) highlighted a unified response to a shared challenge. As noted by Loughlin Deegan, Director of the Lir Academy on the day of the launch,

We've talked about it enough, our consciousnesses have been sufficiently raised, we know what the problem was, we've identified solutions, and in launching these policies today we are committing ourselves as organisations to very concrete proposals that will guarantee that equality of opportunity for women working in Irish theatre becomes everyday. (Falvey, 2018)

The question of an Arts Council response in policy form, had earlier been mooted (Shortall, 2017) and by this point was coming into focus. Following a similar approach to the National Library of Ireland (National Library of Ireland, 2018), in line with the statements on Public Sector Duty (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, n.d.), the Arts Council chose to encompass diversity and inclusion in its policy, publishing a detailed Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy and Strategy in March 2019 (Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, 2019).

### **Change prompting further change**

In late 2017, two years after the #WakingTheFeminists campaign had commenced, and in the wake of the international #MeToo movement, news began to emerge of allegations of sexual harassment and bullying in the Irish theatre community. The allegations pointed to systemic and continuous abuses of power in a sector beset by precarity and insecurity, with instances cited illustrating in sharp relief the lived experiences of artists, particularly female artists, as highly challenging and unsafe.

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An immediate response (Linehan, 2017) from a number of directors of major Irish theatre festivals and companies (Abbey Theatre directors Neil Murray and Graham McLaren, the Gate Theatre's Selina Cartmell, Druid Theatre Company's Garry Hynes, and Rough Magic Theatre Company's Lynne Parker, along with Cian O'Brien of the Project Arts Centre, Willie White of the Dublin Theatre Festival and Kris Nelson of the Dublin Fringe Festival) committed 'to working together to raise awareness and to create a safe culture and environment where unacceptable behaviour can be addressed and challenged.', while also stating that,

'the welfare and wellbeing of everyone working in our theatres is of paramount importance. Therefore, we wish to restate our collective commitment to ensuring that Irish theatres are safe, fair and equitable places for all those working within them.' (Linehan, 2017)

Taking the lead in the formulation of a Code of Behaviour for the sector, the Irish Theatre Institute held an event in March 2018 entitled 'Speak Up and Call it Out' at Liberty Hall, with the support of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. While a range of insights and experiences were shared during the course of the event, its chief focus was to develop a code of practice which could be shared throughout the sector and put into action. Some months later, following a series of pilots with theatre companies, *Dignity in the Workplace: Towards a Code of Behaviour for Irish Theatre* (Irish Theatre Institute, 2018), a code of practice publication developed by Irish Theatre Institute was launched. The code provided companies of all sizes with clear guidelines, processes and resources to ensure dignity at work for all those employed or engaged in their productions. If these were implemented, it would seem as though a particularly turbulent period for theatre had concluded but the need for ongoing vigilance and change continues.

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## Conclusion

Today, almost five years since #WakingTheFeminists began, the impact of its advocacy is very evident. While conversations regarding gender equality, diversity and inclusion, abound across all sectors, the ongoing necessity of strategic action within the arts to address pertinent issues is clear. That the agency with central responsibility for the development of the arts in Ireland, the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, at the publication of its Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy in March 2019, cited its own work on equality as 'too compartmentalised', highlights the wide-reaching ripple effects of a movement whose impetus centred on achieving equality for women in one artform.

In 2016, at the culmination event of #WakingTheFeminists entitled '#OneThingMore' in the Abbey Theatre, the sector was challenged to achieve 50:50 parity by 2020. This target may not have been reached within the last four years, but as we move into that year and the new decade, it will be interesting to observe what progress has been achieved on that target and how the momentum of change will be sustained.

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