

Midlands **Arts** and Culture Magazine

A REVIEW OF THE ARTS IN LAOIS, LONGFORD, OFFALY AND WESTMEATH

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THE WRITTEN WORD
MUSIC & DANCE
THEATRE & FILM
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MidlandsArts

andCultureMagazine



A Word from the Editor

This is going to be an exciting year in the arts in the midlands – there are anniversaries, festivals, numerous special events and activities that will appeal to every age group and cater for all tastes.

This year will also see the midlands become a destination – not just a stop on the way to somewhere else as Manchán Magan puts it in his article on pages 18 and 19 when he examines the role of artists in the midlands and the impact they are having on everyday life and the development of tourism.

However, artists in the midlands “are not the hand maidens of Fáilte Ireland” according to artist Teresa Doyle. “We are infused and informed by this place, but that doesn’t mean we have an obligation to explain it to others. For me the real potency of this area is along the by-roads – the quiet, uninterrupted world where people are living beautiful lives.”

Among the celebrations in 2015 are the tenth anniversaries of Castlepalooza and Shakefest at Charleville Castle in Tullamore. This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of WB Yeats and in Westmeath there will be a series of events in the county’s libraries to mark this special occasion.

Longford is looking to the future with the appointment of a Technologist to the arts office and a second season of the School of Rock which is certain to unveil a new generation of musicians.

The connection between whiskey and the arts is explored by Westmeath Arts Office while the link between renowned artist Francis Bacon and the Laois town of Ballacolla is examined by Thomas Byrne. Young people and their contribution to the arts is definitely encouraged in Laois where the county’s Youth Theatre and School of Music have both achieved great success at home and abroad.

Here’s to the future of the arts in the midlands and the hope that we can all enjoy “beautiful lives”.

Vivienne Clarke of Acumen Media, Editor



STREETE AND ITS PEOPLE

It was the idea of Fr. Joe McGrath to produce a local history book to mark the bicentenary of St. Mary’s Church, Boherquill – the parish church of Streete. His vision was a handsome, durable, colourful, accessible coffee table book packed with local history and pictures.

Local parishioners donated photographs and memorabilia, of days gone by, in their local village and parish of Streete, Co. Westmeath. Snippets of memories and poems were also donated.

In 2014 the publication *Streete and Its People* was awarded second prize in the Nillson Local Heritage Competition at Listowel Writers’ Week, out of sixteen entries.

“It was a proud day for the parish when *Streete and Its People* was launched by Bishop Francis Duffy and an even prouder one when it achieved this award” remarked Breeda Sullivan, a member of the local history team.

Senior Executive Librarian of Athlone Library, Gearoid O’Brien said “Books on parishes and villages come in all shapes and sizes but ‘*Streete and its People*’ breaks the mould.... the editorial committee has given us a great snap-shot in time of the village of Streete, which will be of inestimable value to researchers in years to come.”

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LAOIS WORKSHOP and CONCERT BY GOITSE

Goitse, an Irish word meaning 'come here', is catching on with major festival organisers in Europe and America. Festival promoters understand it to be the name of a brilliant band playing Irish music and Goitse are headlining at a number of prestigious events this year.

Included on their calendar are the Cambridge Folk Festival, one of the premier music events in Europe and one of the longest running and most famous folk festivals in the world, as well as Milwaukie Trad Fest, USA.

Readers of Midlands Arts & Culture Magazine can meet Goitse, the Live Ireland award winners of 'Trad Group of the Year 2015', in concert on Sat May 2nd at Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise. Laois Comhaltas is very pleased to have the support of Dunamais for this major event launching Laois

County Fleadh 2015. The band will give a performance workshop for intermediate and advanced musicians earlier in the day. Early booking is advised, similar concerts recently at Portmarnock, Derry and Birr sold out quickly. Goitse is a five member band with a distinctive sound founded on the quality of their own compositions interspersed with traditional tunes from Ireland and abroad, which make each set entertaining and unique. Regarded by music critics as one of the most 'vibrant, enthusiastic and thrilling' trad groups touring the world at present, all five are graduates of

University of Limerick, World Academy of Music & Dance. Laois natives James Harvey and Colm Phelan became nationally known in 'Trad circles from an early age and have greatly influenced their generation of banjo and bodhrán players respectively. Dundalk born singer and fiddle player Áine McGeeney is musical director of the recently formed Laois Folk Orchestra and teaches with a number of Comhaltas branches in Laois. Guitarist Conal O'Keane hails from Philadelphia and lives in Limerick where he teaches music at UL alongside Dubliner Tadhg Ó Meachair who plays piano and accordion. 'We are committed to Irish music' says Colm Phelan who manages the logistics of the operation, 'sharing this passion makes it easy for us to collaborate and enjoy working together'.

With three albums to their credit the band has a solid repertoire of well polished music, critically acclaimed. *Music that's brimming with energy and creative zeal* - John O'Regan, *Irish Music Magazine*. "A Musical Maturity worthy of the Greatest" - *Le Peuple Breton Magazine*. Colm Phelan has also released his own album of traditional tunes featuring bodhrán accompaniment. Entitled 'Full Circle' it demonstrates the tasteful bodhrán playing of the world champion who is a master of rhythmic variation, while always maintaining the precise beat of the tune.

Keep up to date with Goitse on facebook and at www.goitse.ie

Tickets from Dunamais Arts Centre, 057-8663355 or www.dunamais.ie



STUDENTS aim to capture life through a LENS by Patrick Conboy

Right now, secondary school students across County Longford are getting busy with their cameras, finetuning their artistic eye, and seeking to compose the perfect shot as part of the Longford Schools Photography Programme, which is currently in its sixth year.

"This year's theme is 'Together We're Stronger'," the programme's co-ordinator, Shelley Corcoran, tells the Midlands Arts and Culture Magazine, before going on to emphasise the importance the programme places on creativity.

"It's not about walking out and pressing the button on the camera, it's about the artistic side; creating a concept around the theme. Each student will interpret that theme in their own way, and they'll also develop a slogan to go along with it. A massive thought process goes into the composition before the photo is taken."

Although officially launched on February 12, the students – drawn from Transition Year classes at secondary schools across County Longford, and an adult class at Templemichael College – have been preparing since last September. Their hard work will culminate in the publication of a 64-page photo book, which will be launched in the Atrium Gallery at Longford's Backstage Theatre in May, where there will also be an awards ceremony and exhibition of work.

"There'll be one overall winner, plus awards for the best photographer from each school, best school as a whole, and best anti-drugs message," adds Shelley.

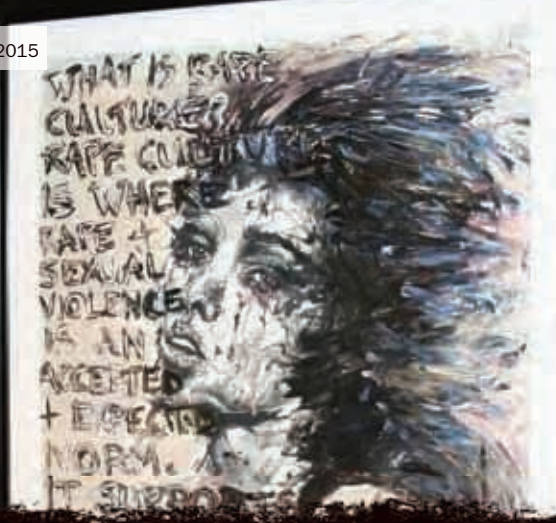
Speaking about the book and the exhibition, Shelley explains that they are essential components of the programme which allow the students to experience audience feedback. She continues by saying that, "Art is a comment on society, so bringing photography into their society gives the students a chance to be visually aware, not just as a form of self-expression, but also to combine art with the everyday – the people and the world around them."

Proceeds from the sale of the book will be donated to St Christopher's Services in Longford town; a community-based organisation which provides comprehensive services to the intellectually challenged.

Meanwhile, Shelley is also keen to point out that many students who have participated in the Longford Schools Photography Programme have gone on to study photography and other associated subjects at third level.

"Students have gone on to the National College of Art and Design, and Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design, and Technology to further pursue photography," she reveals. "Many others have also achieved FETAC awards in associated courses at PLCs."





Atrium Artist - Emma Williams
and her piece titled Rape Culture

ONE TO WATCH

Reflecting on her first solo show in the Westmeath County Buildings Atrium Exhibition Space, 16-year old artist and aspiring tattooist Emma Williams writes here of her relationship with this controversial art form, and some of its intriguing history

Tattooing is as a well-established art form that over the last few years has undergone dramatic changes. In the past tattoos were deemed as dirty, or unsophisticated and although the tattoos themselves from a few decades ago were perhaps less attractive to the eye as body art is now, they were still beautiful original pieces of art that were unfortunately frowned upon.

The current social and cultural status of tattooing has steadily evolved from the anti-social activity in the 1960s that it was lazily linked to, to that of a trendy fashion statement starting in around the 2000s. Before tattoos became more widespread and accepted they were first adopted and showed off by influential rock stars like the Rolling Stones in the early 1970s, and other men and women in the limelight. Tattooing, within a few years, was to become a more accepted form of art and expression in mainstream society.

Tattooing as a form of art has changed a lot in the last 30

years, so much more can be done with tattoos. The detail, colours, texture and all qualities of fine art can now be seen in tattoos, which has most likely had a knock off effect on why they're more accepted in today's world. There are also many different styles of tattoos including, old school, new school, realistic, black and grey, tribal, surrealist etc. The preconceptions of tattooed men and women have also changed. Tattoo artists and their clients are not discriminated against like they were in the past, due to the new dialogue around body art - whether you have tattoos for a fashion statement or because you have a strong appreciation for a variety of visual art forms.

Tattooing is recognized as both an art form and a profession now and tattoo-related art work is the subject of some of most skillfull work seen. Creating beautiful works of art, whether it be painting, drawing sculpting etc is raw talent of course, but being able to put your art work on someone's body forever and for it to be so full of life from using ink and different sized needles is surreal.

The shrill cry of "...you're never going to get a job" is something that is heard by so many people who have chosen to get tattoos in visible places on their bodies, but as the number of inked men and women grow, is the traditional assumption that tattoos and jobs don't mix really true in 2015? Workplace tattoo policies vary among different industries and workplaces, but with many companies stressing their commitments to diversity, tattoos are becoming increasingly unproblematic in job placements, proving that the stigma that was associated with tattoos themselves is now steadily decreasing.

Emma Williams first solo show 'The Journey' featured in the improvised Atrium-Space in Westmeath County Buildings in Mullingar. The young artist showed work inspired from her sketching-prep for tattoos to a more evolved and socially reflective collection of pieces.

TOM PHELAN PUBLISHES SIXTH NOVEL, LIES THE MUSHROOM PICKERS TOLD

Lies the Mushroom Pickers Told, the sixth novel by Laois native Tom Phelan, has just been published in New York by Arcade Publishing.

Part human comedy and part mystery, *Lies the Mushroom Pickers Told* is a story about what holds a village together and what keeps people apart. When journalist Patrick Bracken returns from England to Gohen, the Irish village where he was born, he knows the eyes of the townspeople are on him. He has come home to investigate two deaths that happened decades earlier, when he was a child, deaths that were ruled accidental. Patrick knows—and believes the whole town knows—the two victims were murdered. He knows because he and his best friend were witnesses.

Publishers Weekly calls *Lies the Mushroom Pickers Told* a "witty novel" and notes that the "humor and the plentiful details of the farming lifestyle do much to enrich Phelan's entertaining murder mystery." A

five-star review on goodreads.com says, *Lies* "is not only a mystery but a marvelous coming-of-age tale, and a fascinating look at life in a small Irish town in the middle of the 20th century."

The cover illustration on *Lies the Mushroom Pickers Told* is "Turning Back 2," a drawing by award-winning Belfast/Mayo artist Keith Wilson. According to Wilson, the cover shows "a simple and ordinary bend on a rural back road not a mile from" where he works in Mayo. He notes that people "might think that it is somewhere they recognise. My aim is to make paintings and drawings that are at once highly specific yet ultimately universal."

Tom Phelan, who grew up on a farm in Mountmellick, is the author most recently of *Nailer*,

set against the backdrop of the industrial schools, and *The Canal Bridge*, a story of Ireland and the First World War.

Lies the Mushroom Pickers Told is available in hardcover and as an ebook from www.amazon.com and as an audiobook from www.audible.com. For additional information, see www.tomphelan.net and www.facebook.com/tomphelannovels.



A DECADE SHAKING

SHAKEFEST the culturally diverse dance festival in Tullamore celebrates a decade of moving and shaking. Terri Dale, director of the festival talks to the Midlands Arts and Culture Magazine about the excitement of reaching the milestone.

"We are excited to announce an amazing 10th anniversary festival programme, with an international line up that includes Kila, Rustiqua, The Underscore Orchestra, Bunny and the Beardman Digital Projections and an epic anniversary fire ceremony and performances."

Shakefest takes place on May 30th and 31st at the beautiful Charleville Castle in Tullamore, where the festival has its origins. "We began in 2006 as a Holistic Cultural Dance Workshop," says Terri "and it has grown from strength to strength over the past 10 years to bring an eclectic cultural extravaganza of art and dance for hundreds of dance, energy and movement enthusiasts."

Audiences will be treated to the energetic music of KILA, Ireland's ultimate trad ensemble who are showing no indication of slowing down after 25 years! Fans over the years attest to never tiring of their gigs and infectious enthusiasm, and whom many claim to be the ultimate mood enhancer. Formed in 1987, their performances have been said to be 'one of the most euphoric live experiences a music fan can enjoy. Few other bands can claim to play with such relentless energy and commitment.... Though very much steeped in Irish traditions, Kila filter influences from all over the world'. (Malachy O'Neill, BBC Review). Kila will play at a special family-friendly hour in the early evening at Shakefest.

The dance highlight is international guest instructors Rustiqua, a tribal dance company from Bratislava, Slovakia. They will conduct an exciting themed workshop for dancers such as Tribal Dance Chakras, Swing Box and a Tribal Fusion Masterclass as well as performing an exciting main stage act.

Further confirmed international acts include Bunny and the Beardman, a collaboration of German iPad artists Benjamin Rabe and Fabric Lenny (www.bunnyandthebeardman.com) who make site specific live projected drawings and animations. Bunny & the Beardman will also facilitate a youth project with a local artist to create their artistic animations alongside their own mesmerizing layered visuals. Visitors will be treated to an animated digital show projected onto Charleville Castle itself after dark.

Shakefest will also provide an eclectic mix of workshops for all ages ranging from The Fuinneamh Drum Experience, KHI Living History Re-enactments, children's spontaneous art zone, Dr Sketchy's, Gymboree, community dance, musical and poetry performances, circus, and cultural taster workshops for all ages.

The first 250 through the gate from 12pm will also receive a Shakefest 10 commemorative gift! More information or Tickets for Shakefest can be purchased at the gate or at www.shakefest.net or

www.eventbrite.ie. All proceeds will be going towards Charleville Castle Restoration Fund.

Shakefest is supported by the Offaly County Council, Maglus Stylus iPad Pen, Midlands 103, Pirate Relief, Offaly Independent, Heartworks and Midlands Framing.



SCHOOL OF ROCK is now in session

Following on from a successful first session in late 2014, Longford's very own School of Rock is back in session.

Developed in partnership with the Longford Schools Completion Programme, School of Rock takes place on Saturday afternoons in Templemichael College, and provides a relaxed, informal environment for young musicians and bands. The course involves tuition in instruments and vocal training from experienced musicians, learning band management skills, and capacity-building and networking. It concludes with the creation of a live music event and music programme.

"It's for young people who are passionate about music and it allows them to engage with like-minded kids instead of just playing in the bedroom," says School of Rock's co-ordinator, Shane Crossan. "With formal music lessons they don't get any exposure or the chance to play with other musicians. School of Rock also allows them to do this, while enhancing

their social and networking skills, as well as improving their confidence.

"All the young people taking part get the chance to perform together, and we have an outlet for their talents through our link to the Little Blue Room – a local music venue which holds daytime gigs on Saturdays for young bands."

The first term of School of Rock took place between November 28th and December 15th of last year, and from small beginnings it quickly became a success.

"In our first week, we had seven young people but by the third week we had 27, and at present we have six tutors, who teach guitar, drums, piano, and voice. It's worked well. One of the biggest surprise for me was the enthusiasm the tutors have for it; it's something



they would have liked to have had themselves when they were growing up."

The second term of School of Rock began on February 7 with an expanded format which will last 10 weeks. It costs €45 per person, and is open to all secondary school students in Co Longford.

"The money will go towards financing a one-week summer school we intend to run," Shane adds, before thanking the Principal of Templemichael College, Siorcha Nic Dhonnacha, and Co Longford Arts Officer, Fergus Kennedy, for their support.

For more information on School of Rock, contact Shane Crossan on 087 4144082 or shane@lscplongford.com. School of Rock also has a Facebook page at www.facebook.com/longfordschoolofrock.

'GUL'*

When you hear about Afghanistan or Syria it is predominantly in association with war, conflict or trauma and not immediately in relation to creativity, resilience, hope or Tullamore.

Last year Rowena Keaveny worked with refugees from both countries who were resettled in Tullamore in late 2013, in a project called 'Gul' exploring identity, relocation and resettlement using their traditional craft making, here she talks about her experience.

"When a family or individual has been forced to leave their home country due to conflict and all the complexities, inherent in that upheaval, arriving in a new country with refugee status is really only the start of the process. A new language, new culture and way of living all have to be negotiated. As the facilitator on the project I've only had to navigate a bus from Birr to Tullamore not across countries and boundaries where war has unfortunately become a way of life. One of the participants told me that she was so thankful to Ireland and the people of Tullamore, 'I am so happy for my children, that they have been given a new life here in Tullamore and will now be able to grow up without the fear of war.'

Initially when language was problematic we communicated with each other through visual images, sign language and the internet on our phones. A lot of their skills in craft making have been passed from generation to generation, so more traditional materials are needed and these were sometimes hard to source, which the artist went to great lengths to find for them. I was struck by the difference between a new community determined and proud to hold onto, pass down and share its expertise contrasted against the unfortunate reality that Ireland's more traditional crafts such as lace making are being increasingly perceived as 'heritage'.

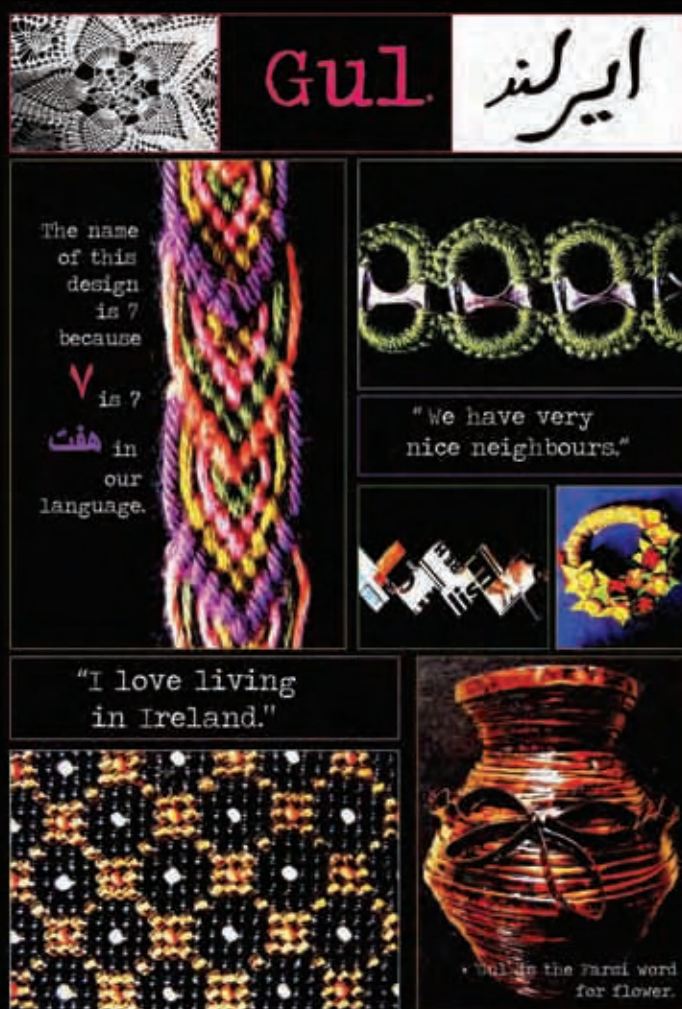
As the project developed, it became evident that although based in traditional techniques dating back over 5,000 years, this work naturally embraces the very modern concept of being 'environmentally friendly'. Ring pulls from drinks cans are crocheted intricately together to form table mats, while old newspapers and magazines are rolled tightly into tubes and woven into baskets, vases or picture frames glazed with a coffee and glue varnish.

When you live in the Midlands you become used to hearing negative and disparaging views of the region, so it's been very moving to hear the opposite and very heartfelt opinions expressed, such as "We are used to living in a war zone, so we really needed the peace of living in this town, Tullamore. It is so calm here so beautiful" and "When I look at this water it gives me hope. There is so much life here and the flowers are very beautiful. It makes me feel alive."

In the short term this project has provided a unique opportunity for a creative exchange of skills and cultures combined with meaningful interaction between emerging and established communities. The result is vibrant, multifaceted, intricate work that reflect and represent the resilience, expertise and courage of its creators and in the longer term I look forward to seeing how it develops and flourishes."

This project was made possible through The Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration, Dept of Justice and Equality, the former Tullamore Town Council, Offaly County Council and the Presbyterian Church Ministry for their support. A publication accompanying the project is available, for copies or for further information please contact Bridie Costello Hynes on 05793/57427 or bcostellohynes@offalycoco.ie

**Gul is the Farsi word for flower, the name for the project was chosen to represent the 'flowering' of new lives as they develop and grow roots in Tullamore.*





And the music keeps on playing...

Ask the Principal, ask the Pupil... different perspectives as the dust settles after the excitement of the recent historic win for Moate Community School of the All Island School Choir Competition. Here, Westmeath Arts Office chats to Tom Lowry school principal and Niamh Murray a Transition Year pupil and choir member:

Tell us a little bit about Moate Community School and its strong culture of music, what's the deal?

Tom Lowry - Principal

Our school has always had a strong tradition and appreciation for Music, with Music offered as a subject on the curriculum at both Junior and Leaving Certificate. Musicals and performances by both our choir and orchestra take place annually and are a key feature of life in our school. The Music department is a strong and thriving body which encourages participation in Music both curricular and extra-curricular.

Niamh Murray - Student

Moate Community School has always had music at its core. The school choir and orchestra give students a great chance to express themselves through music. I have been a member of both the school orchestra and the choir since First Year, it always gives me great enjoyment and an escape from the regular school day.

Lorna Duignan, your Choir Director was a key to this success, tell us a bit about her approach?

(T) Lorna is a born leader and together with her colleagues, Giselle and Ann Marie, their vision for this success was the key ingredient. Their enthusiasm and dedication was infectious and brought students and everyone in the school along with them. Their hard work and preparation was amazing and the credit for this achievement must rest with them.

(N) All members of the choir have a strong bond with Ms. Duignan. She works so hard and has become friends with all of us. This makes it very enjoyable and easier for us to work together.

Out of the whole competition experience, what about the whole process / experience surprised you... something you wouldn't have anticipated?

(T) I was surprised by the response of the community and the country in general. We received countless cards and emails of support and congratulations from all over which was a great reward to the teachers and students involved.

(N) I was really surprised by how close all members of the choir became throughout the process. Not only did we bond at a musical level, through this whole experience, I have made friends for life.

In the lead up to the final what was the point where you thought "we are really in with a chance here"...

(T) There was a point in the preparations when I first heard our choir perform one of the pieces for the final. It was a difficult piece and I knew that it was risky. But they handled it well, it was then I felt that we had a chance.

(N) One day, one of the Year-heads in the school came in to listen to us rehearsing. She was gobsmacked with the exact words "Oh My God". I think at this moment, we all realised we had a chance of winning.

In the lead up to the final what was the point where you thought "this isn't going to happen"...

(T) Sitting in the Titanic Centre before the final, I have to admit I felt a little doubtful. Perhaps my thoughts were influenced by the realisation of the strong competition we were facing or just the enormity of the event. Coupled with this, the rehearsal didn't go too well that afternoon so it was a nervous time for sure.

(N) After some of our long hours of practising both in school and in our local Church, energy levels were low. At this point, we felt that if the songs didn't work, we wondered if we had a chance of winning.

What do you think is the secret for success for a school or indeed any choir?

(T) There is a clear message for all schools and choirs in this success. Work hard, prepare well and enjoy what you are doing. Choose your pieces well but above all believe in yourself, believe that success is there for the taking.

(N) The secret is a lot of hard work and dedication – but always make sure to enjoy every moment of it!

Other than that moment where the winning choir announced, what other moment will you still remember in 20 years time?

(T) I will remember an evening in Mullingar, January 26th 2015, when our school was written into the history of our county, when we were awarded formally with a Civic Reception by Westmeath County Council. It was a historic moment for Moate Community School.

(N) The experience of going to Belfast with all my close friends was so much fun. We achieved something special and we will never forget it!

For the school and the wider community – what do you think the legacy of this win might be, what would you like it to be?

(T) As a Community School, we accept all students in our area who apply to come to our school. We are not selective in our admissions policy, we are a school of "ordinary" students but we have done something extraordinary! That is our legacy and we are immensely proud of this and always will be.

(N) Being part of the first Community School choir to win this competition was such an honour. It brings a great sense of pride to the school and the community.



Longford Arts Office unveils Technologist in Residence

For some time, County Longford Arts Office has been leading the way when it comes to developing digital platforms for the arts, with websites and multimedia projects dedicated to all mediums. To exploit this area even further, the county's Arts Officer, Fergus Kennedy, recently announced the appointment of Paul Grealy, a Technologist in Residence.

"We were the first arts office in the country to produce a print and multimedia DVD anthology of creative writing," Fergus points out. "Some of the other projects we've completed include 'Describe Manual' - a children's creative writing development manual book and DVD bundle - and an exploratory urban development public art project in DVD format."

The office currently operates four separate websites to provide a window to the world for Longford artists:

- VirtualWriter.ie - Ireland's longest-established new literature website.
- LongfordMusic.ie - featuring music of all genres created by local musicians.
- VisualLongford.ie - A showcase for visual artists from the county.
- MidlandCollegeOfPhotography.ie - An online hub promoting the college's activities and the work of Longford photographers.

"The next website to go live will be LongfordDigitalArts.ie, which will include the work of local film-makers, animators, video artists, and

photographers. It will also explore the matrix between digital technology and creative arts, and will be a shop window to the work of Longford's digital artists and a source of information about the digital arts sector both at home and abroad," Fergus reveals, before adding that he is keen to explore further ways to create art through digital media.

"To do this we engaged the services of Paul Grealy, a specialist with background in digital media development, who also has an established interest in the arts. He will be a Technologist in Residence for a period of six months," he continues.

"He's been involved with the digital programme at Longford Arts Office since its inception, and he has many ideas of how to incorporate digital technology into the creative process, in the areas of music, dance, visual arts, and literary arts."

Paul, who has an MA in Digital Design from Dublin Institute of Technology, says he is looking forward to his residency.

"I'm delighted to be appointed to this exciting role. Fergus and the County Longford Arts Office have a

strong record of developing innovative websites and multimedia applications - a record that goes back many years. Projects the Arts Office have developed include websites, CD-ROMs, audio, and video."

During his six months at Technologist in Residence, Paul will focus on four main areas:

1. Development of creative projects at the nexus of digital media / computer technology and the arts.
2. Develop audiences for the arts through digital technology, particularly social media.
3. Advise on the further development of content and functionality of County Longford Arts Office's current website.
4. Develop a draft three-year plan for the implementation of technology in the arts in Longford.

"Working with Fergus will be exciting as he has great enthusiasm for technology and is willing to embrace it for the further development of Longford's artists, and the wider arts community and audience in the county," Paul concedes.

SOJOURN



Offaly-based producer/director Paddy Slattery is not one to rest on his laurels. With *Skunk Dog* winning the prestigious Royal Television Society Award, he is preparing to release the highly anticipated *Sojourn*, a film inspired by the work of WB Yeats while already into production with a short drama titled *Today* starring John Connors (LOVE/HATE) and Lalor Roddy (Hunger).

Today is a hard hitting drama about a man who wakes up one morning in his car, disorientated, with no recollection of how he ended up parked in the middle of nowhere. The harsh reality soon comes flooding back once he gathers his bearings. Written and to be directed by Tristan Heanue, filming will take place in Connemara with the aim of premiering at this year's Galway Film Fleadh.

Sojourn is set for a release that will coincide with the 150th anniversary of the birth of Yeats on June 13th 2015. This visually poetic film tells the story of Aedh, who finds a new muse. Her name is Aislinn; a beautiful, playful and mischievous distraction from mundanity. He falls in love and falls hard, but struggles to furnish her with attention or quench her insatiable desires. The story follows Aedh through the emotional highs and devastating lows of his sojourn into love and despair.

To follow the progress of this film, you can check in on the film's facebook page - www.facebook.com/Sojournthemovie

Nuala HAYES

Claire Ó Brien caught up with Nuala Hayes at the Laois Arthouse, where she is in residence for the last six months.

Cigarette smoke rises in thick plumes at the tiny cavern-like pub theatre. It's the early 1990s, an autumn evening at An Beal Bocht, Dublin.

A woman steps to the microphone, fiddle in hand. Blonde hair falls in waves over her shoulders, over her long scarf and tunic. She plucks at her instrument as the audience hush. Then she speaks about Branohm, the dreamy reel she's about to play.

*In the wings, spellbound by the tale of *The Voyage of Bran*, is actor Nuala Hayes, one of the event organisers. This was one of many transformative moments on the journey that brought Nuala to a residency at the one-room studio apartment she occupies at the Arthouse in Stradbally where she's gathering folktales for the Laois edition of *The History Press's Folk Tales* series.*

Laois, she says, is dripping with stories.

"It's as if the history of the country is bound up in this little county and it's held sacred by local storytellers like Johanna O'Dooley, who doesn't deal in gossip unless it's a hundred years old."

As she recalls that extraordinary night in Dublin Nuala sits back thoughtfully in her armchair and swivels as if shaking out the memory of the tale that mesmerised her.

"I said, 'What's that? I've never heard of this!' And it was supposed to be one of the most ancient stories we had."

Nuala had been looking for a story to tell herself at the spoken word and music gigs she and musician Ellen Cranitch had been hosting at venues like An Beal Bocht and Mother Redcap's, events that were an integral part of the Irish storytelling revival. "I went to the Royal Irish Academy and looked up the old manuscript and said wow, this is a fantastic story. I kind of re-worked it for myself and started telling it with music," she says.

And that was that.

You'd expect Nuala was steeped in the oral tradition or at least in storytelling. The daughter of writer and Radio Eireann producer Micheál O'Haodha, she trained for the stage at the Abbey Theatre and performed numerous roles over many years, including Maire in the first staging of Brian Friel's *Translations*.

But her memories of oral storytelling come from holidays spent with her maternal uncle in Cork "where he'd terrify us with ghost stories, of things that happened to him- they always happened to him - when he'd be passing by graveyards."

Home was full of books and Nuala was a voracious reader.

The story that changed her life is Hans Anderson's *The Snow Queen*, and "the absolute extraordinary attraction and terror around this idea of two children who were living a perfectly normal friendly life and were best friends until one day the snow came." The boy, Kai, is eventually rescued from the Snow Queen's spell by the sorrowful tears of his sister, a concept less appealing to Nuala now that she's lived through the feminist revolution of the 1970s, but the story haunts her still.

The Abbey was another story.

"There was such respect for the written word. The text was..." she searches for the right word... "precious."

"The Shadow of the Glen was performed really seriously and in the Abbey style," she says, taking a mock-dramatic pose one moment and shaking her head in disbelief the next. "But there was never a conversation about it being a folk tale. There was a way of performing the text and it was so far away from the original story, from the actual creation of the theatre. It strikes me now how strange it was." The exception was Eamon Kelly.

"He was absolutely amazing in that he was a wonderful actor but he was completely in tune with the tradition of storytelling and understood it. And he understood the role of the story teller as well - all the richness, the humour, the fantasy of the storyteller and the seanchai."

"He would have been someone I totally revered but I never imagined that one day I'd even be considering this."

"This' (via a few more fascinating adventures) is a fabulously eclectic career, including storytelling and story-gathering as well as acting.

Nuala is a lively raconteur, but never more engaged than when talking about the people she's met in Laois and the stories they've shared with her, and the scores of pages she has already written up recounting the exploits and morality of a cast of weird and wonderful Laois legends and characters. She's equally thrilled by the beautifully intricate, sometimes cheeky illustrations her friend, fellow folktale fan and renowned artist Rita Duffy has created to match them.

Writing the text of folktales is - quite literally - a different story to gathering oral records as she did on her last visit to the Midlands twelve years ago. There's more decision-making than you sense Nuala is comfortable with but she's

not letting the editing get in the way.

"Writing down is not the be-all and end-all. It's spreading the stories that's more important," she says.

Even more important to her is the engagement between the storyteller and audience and the power of imagination that binds them. It makes her almost bounce with enthusiasm.

"That's just the way I am," she says with a wide smile. "I do get great energy from listening to a story. I almost get as much enjoyment from listening to a story as I do telling a story sometime."

Whether it's *The Snow Queen*, *The Voyage of Bran* or the tale of Biddy Aghaboe's Well in Portlaoise, they have the same magic for Nuala. "I just believed them. It's that you can tell people these stories and they'll go on the journey. You're not earthbound in the storytelling process. You can go anywhere."

From Rossmore to Ballyadams and Mountmellick to Mountrath, that's exactly what she's doing.

Friday 20th March, Stradbally Library 11am

Performance for World Storytelling Day, Theme is "Wishes"

Audience: Stradbally Primary Schools, Arts Office to draft invitation/flyer and invite schools

May 2015

"Sharing local stories" exchange of local folklore and stories.

Thursday 14th May,

Mountrath Library

7.00pm

Tuesday 19th May,

Mountmellick

Library 7.00pm

27th or 28th

August 2015 -

Heritage Week

Launch of the

Folktales of

Laois



THREErivers

The lure of the Irish Storytelling tradition draws scholars from many far flung corners, here Liz Warren describes her experience of the Three Rivers programme now in its eleventh year.

In June of this year, Mesa Community College based in Mesa, Arizona, will be bringing its 11th group of students to Athlone as part of Study Abroad Ireland. This year students will be immersed in studies of Irish Religion to the Middle Ages, Digital Photography, and the Irish Storytelling Tradition.

For ten of those eleven years I have been fortunate to teach the Irish Storytelling Tradition class in the programme. Students learn about the mythic cycles, the hero and saint legends, the glorious folktales, and even some jokes and poems. They also learn about the importance of place to the Irish story tradition, and about the ethics of telling Irish stories responsibly.

Our classroom is awash in story for the month, as each of the 20 students learns and tells a minimum of three stories. To those 60 stories, we add stories from noted Irish storytellers such as Liz Weir, Eddie Lenihan, Pat Speight, Nuala Hayes, Niall de Búrca, Aileen McBride, and Jack Lynch – all of whom have visited our class. Liz Weir has told stories for every class that I've taught over the years.

We have been very warmly welcomed by people in the Midlands. For example, last summer several of my students attended the Shannon Storyteller's meeting at Flannery's in Athlone where four of them told stories to the hugely engaged group. It was the highlight of their trip.

Seosamh Ó Maolalaí storytelling in Irish at the Ballinasloe library



Liz Weir with 2014 Study Abroad Ireland storytelling students

Where The Wind Sleeps, New and Selected Poems (Salmon Poetry 2014) • **Noel Monahan**

TheCURSEofTheWORDS

Review by Jean O'Brien

American writer Charles Bukowski's dictum, Don't write unless you really have to, could easily apply to Noel Monahan, he just has to and glad we are that he does. Monahan's New & Selected Poems, *Where The Wind Sleeps* was published last year by Salmon Poetry. In Monahan's case though it is less a curse of words and more a delight and exuberance of words. His work shines with an optimism not too often found in poetry, not to say that his work is not serious in intent, because it is, but rather that it tends towards the celebratory and no bad thing in our world that can sometimes seem so weighted down that all delight is stifled.

Monahan loves nature, as evidenced in many poems, such as *Winter Nuptials*:

*'A flock of sparrows pirouette
Across the patio, their tiny dance
is written in the snow.'*

and in his strange and beautiful *The Snow Has Something To Say*:

*'And in the white of a snowflake
The bee turned into a fish, his wings, fins,
Each liquid breath, a word melting on his lips.'*

Monahan says he is fascinated by the fast paced social and cultural changes in modern Ireland and in placing himself within it. His poetry spans over 20 years: his first collection being, *Opposite Walls* (1991) but he had been writing and publishing in magazines and journals for a number of years before that. He

grew up in 1950s Ireland in Granard a place name that resonates for all the wrong reasons. Monahan deals with this disturbing event is his powerful poem *Scar On A Country Town*:

*'Torn apart
By an impossible hope
To conceal Guilt
That's stored in country towns
and handed down.'*

This and a number of other tragic events made Ireland. He also grew up in the Ireland that produced poignant poems such as Aunt Gretta and Cardboard Box Man, nowadays there would be uproar if you mentioned a man with special needs, in a poem that begins with the line. *'We don't know what mother dropped him'*.

Monahan's sensibilities range far, with his work translated into Russian, French, Romanian and Italian, not to mention his writing in Irish and his own translations of it. Most notable his wonderful long ranging and exuberantly imaginative interpretation of the Mad Sweeney story, based on a legend where Sweeney is banished by St. Ronan to live as a wild bird in the trees. Monahan could be described as a polymath and has collaborated with visual artists and musicians, his plays that have been performed by Livin' Dred Theatre and RTE Radio Drama, (he won the PJ O'Connor Award). His poetry was prescribed text for the Leaving Certificate and he has garnered many garlands for his work -

The Seacat Poetry Ireland Award, The Hiberno -

English Award and The Irish Writers' Union Poetry Award to mention a few. A selection of his work has been translated into French by Emmanuel Malherbet and was published in 2014 by *Alidades* under the title, *Celui Qui Porte Un Veau & Autres Poemes*.

Monahan is not yet done and dusted, not yet free of the curse of the words. His new poems in the Selected are as wide ranging as ever, starting with a tender nature poem *Golden Plover* where the last line has them 'fly away in strange formations.' He has poems dealing with the fall of the Banks and the rise of NAMA, to a poem about Ghost Estates and a witty two lines titled *The Eucharistic Congress 2012*, which I quote in full:

*The Government of the Holy Grail
is entirely male.*

These poems are a pleasure to read, some more so than others. Time is moving on for Monahan, as it is for the rest of us, he has survived a life threatening illness, which has not diminished his zest for life and poetry. In a poem to his Aorta Valve he says:

*'My new aorta valve
Is pure poetry, pure rhythm,'*

What more could you want.



A BOWER FOR SISTERS

Aisling O'Rourke spent 18 months documenting Our Lady's Bower in Athlone as both a photographer and former pupil. Ahead of an exhibition at the University of the Arts, London this May, she talks about the emotive connections that have inspired this stunning body of work.

"It never occurred to me, that Our Lady's Bower Boarding School would stop being a home to lost souls like me. However, it seems even my teenage refuge, isn't immune to the powers of recession.

The story goes that when Jean Baptiste Debrabant, decided to build Our Lady's Bower Convent and Boarding School, he used the designs from his home in the south of France to save costs in this new venture. Fact or fiction, the Boarding School has now closed because of financial issues. After 130 years, the La Sainte Union order of Roman Catholic Nuns, can no longer afford to keep it running and pay for the care of an ageing population of sisters.

It was a culture shock living with over 100 girls. I had no concept of a life with sisters. My Enid Blyton knowledge of boarding schools didn't prepare me for four-minute showers and questionable chicken

dinners. It took some getting used to. My Blyton collection also didn't prepare me for the feeling of camaraderie, or the presence of the Bower Girls who had been there, and survived.

It only takes a moment, just a split second, for the constant hum of girlish chatter and the damp smell of cooking from the refectory to come flooding back to me. Returning in the last two years, a decade on from graduating was more difficult than I'd imagined.

It seems Our Lady's Bower called me back, in preparation for an unexpected personal trauma. This time, I found my refuge in the silence of the chapel and the now deserted dorms. I found myself, not only reflecting on the life and times of the boarding school, but also on myself. The prism of those stained glass windows has provided an unexpected

Sr Austin from Aisling O'Rourke's book.



clarity. Despite having left just over a decade ago Our Lady's Bower is still giving me the chance to discover myself.

A Bower for Sisters is the culmination of 18 months of visits to Our Lady's Bower Athlone and documenting the building, before it bid farewell to its last 11 boarders in June of 2014. The project is presented in the form of a handmade artist book and will be exhibited at the University of the Arts London in May of 2015. I am currently working on raising funds to do a short publishing run of the book and to have an exhibition of the work in Ireland.

www.aislingorourke.com

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS CONFIRMS SUPPORT FOR PIONEERING MUSIC EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Minister Jan O'Sullivan, TD, confirmed Department of Education and Skills support for co-funding a further four Music Education Partnerships in Laois, Cork City, South Dublin and Wicklow at a special event hosted in Portlaoise by Music Generation Laois.

Music Generation, the national music education programme initiated by Music Network following a €7m philanthropic donation by U2 and The Ireland Funds, has moved another step forward in its vision to become a long-term and lasting part of the national music education landscape. Minister Jan O'Sullivan announced that her Department would commence co-funding of a further four Music Education Partnerships in Cork City, Laois, South Dublin and Wicklow. The funding from the Department is matched by support from local Music Education Partnerships. The event was held in the recently refurbished Portlaoise Youth Education Centre, now home to Music Generation Laois and Laois School of Music, where the Minister was treated to a live performance by local young musicians from Laois School of Rock and Pop. The Centre is operated by Laois Offaly ETB, and also the Youthreach

programme also operates out of the centre.

Music Generation provides young people with access to high quality subsidised vocal and instrumental tuition in their local area. Since its foundation in 2009 the programme has established Music Education Partnerships in 12 counties, creating access for up to 20,000 children and young people and providing employment opportunities for over 250 professional musicians.

Speaking at the event, Minister Jan O'Sullivan TD, said: "Music Generation truly is an innovative and pioneering partnership model, which has transformed the landscape of non-mainstream music education in Ireland today. Providing children and young people with high quality music education is an important investment that will pay dividends in many ways for years to come. My Department would like to thank U2, The Ireland

Funds and local Music Education Partnerships for their important contribution to this initiative. I wish Music Generation continued success in its mission to provide access to quality performance music education for children and young people of all abilities, a goal my Department is delighted to support."

Commenting on this next stage of Music Generation's development, The Edge said: "U2 are immensely proud of the achievements of Music Generation and it's exciting to see the programme at this advanced stage of development. We would like to thank all of the partners involved for their commitment to ensuring its success into the future."

For further information contact Sinead Ryan Assistant Co-ordinator, Music Generation Laois on 057 8664176 or email sryan@laoiscoco.ie





CASTLEPALOOZA unique & boutique



Cillian Stewart is the man behind Charleville Castle's Castlepalooza Music and Arts Festival and 2015 marks the tenth year for this unique boutique festival. Maura Cunningham talked to Cillian about why he thinks Castlepalooza has been such a success.

Ten years! Congratulations! I know a lot of work goes into something like this. Did you ever think, looking back to the first year you held it, that Castlepalooza would still be going strong in 2015 or were you full of confidence coming into it?

I knew it would never be just one festival. From the very first event, it was clear that we had created something special - the same friendly atmosphere we saw emerge at the first event is enjoyed by festival-goers a decade later. This is one of the qualities that often disappear as festivals grow and evolve but we've held on to it.

I found the confidence to run a second festival even after the financial loss of the first; when I lost less money after the second, I knew was on to something! Persistence and a good amount of positive thinking really is the key.

I'm already working on the exciting changes for the following ten years as it's really important to keep it fresh, current and fun! It's a full time job for 11 months of every year - it's all I ever think about or (coming close to the event) dream of. We

start planning for the next year a month after the last one is finished. It's necessary to take a break and completely log off for a couple of weeks after the clean up, otherwise I'd burn out. The good thing is that every year is completely different so it's very exciting starting the next one from scratch.

What has been the steepest learning curve for you personally in terms of putting on a festival?

Dealing with bigger promoters whose interests are to keep all the burgeoning festivals as small as possible. For my part, I concentrate on making Castlepalooza a success, do my own thing and keep the head down!

You have been nominated a number of times for various awards, including 'Best Small Festival in Europe', how often do you get to other festivals?

I try to get away to one festival overseas per year so I have a good few under my belt - particularly in the U.S. It's interesting to see that many of these festivals battle against the sun compared to us and our rain! It's just as much of an issue as rain is to

us. But I think you're better off coming up with your own ideas and trying them out. We were the first festival in Ireland to introduce full flushing ceramic toilets and solar powered showers. The bigger festivals followed suit in many areas.

Highlights and lowlights?

It's been tough working through the recession but it makes it even better that we are through it in a solid position. The highlight is always the music! Hundreds of acts apply every year. We do listen to them but mostly we have our own hit list and go for them. We try to keep 50% of our acts from Ireland - ensuring a platform for them. You could argue it's also better for the environment...a smaller carbon footprint!

Can you give us a peek into this years line up?

No sorry, you'll hear about it when we launch. Get your early bird tickets now at www.castlepalooza.com, they're very reasonable!

Castlepalooza 2015 runs from 31st July – August 2nd and early bird tickets are on sale now!

Whiskey - Lockes Distillery, Kilbeggan
by Terence O'Connell



GOLDEN AGE

by Miriam Mulrennan

As the currency of Irish Whiskey rides high, Westmeath Arts office reflects on whether all this talk of Whiskey's 'golden age' and 'renaissance' has something else to say, perhaps something around cultural perceptions and what Irishness might mean today.

Irish whiskey is currently the fastest-growing spirit in the world, and the midlands in particular - is no stranger to this phenomenon with highly successful operations such as Tullamore Dew and Kilbeggan Distillery.

So beyond the sophisticated marketing, and the vagaries of global trends in spirit consumption what can be said about the ancient elixir's softer focus, its cultural touchstone. Notwithstanding the problems inherent in the very real issues associated with alcohol consumption, there appears within this 'renaissance' to be a move away from the worrying cultural associations that existed previously around Irishness in the context of spirits. The "please don't hurt my son, have another drink" narrative that propagated much of our film and television drama of past decades seems to have abated. And in doing so, it seems to have moved on to something more vibrant, a more energised, less lazy perception of Irishness. So perhaps it is this perception that the L'Oreal Generation all over the world seem to be connecting with (L'Oreal Generation...*because they're worth it*). Lady Gaga referred to whiskey as her "longtime boyfriend who is always there when I need him". Someone is always having a tumbler of whiskey in *Mad Men* and *Boardwalk Empire*. We don't know how we know, but somehow we do know that Scotch is associated with being older - the drink of parents and grandparents, whereas Irish whiskey is the hip drink of the millennials (twenty and thirty something's), it is slightly edgy but without making too much effort.

A look at the slick ad created by Opperman Weiss, the New York ad agency responsible for Tullamore Dew illustrates well, how inextricably linked this newly emerging perception of Irishness are to these behemoth brands. It features an elegant group of suited men, trilby-ed and achingly cool, imbibing in the rain, the morning before the groom's big day. Amazingly, the ad skilfully avoids the worrying old associations of Irish drinking culture, and presents a fresh version Irishness. It speaks softly, it presumes authenticity and it doesn't need to carry a big stick.

In the discourse around identity, community and authenticity – advertisers are not always considered to be in the conversation. However some would suggest that advertisers are in many ways our true cultural intermediaries. If this is so, then through the success of Irish Whiskey globally, these associated perceptions and lifestyle snapshots which are the toolkit of any self respecting brand manager, we can perhaps say that a new perception of Irishness is emerging.

If we observe the equally slick Jameson Black Barrel ad, this depicts a furniture maker, immersed in his craft, while using old Jameson barrels to make bespoke furniture. The ad is almost meditative in quality. Reflecting on his craft the furniture maker says that an "artist signs something on the front and a craftsman signs it on the back". Perhaps the same can be said of the current centre-stage-ness of Irish Whiskey, the admirably successful brands have done the graft of bringing these brands to the fore and building a narrative that is unique to their individual brands, but culturally we are reminded that the signature on the back is Irish.





No Play without Play

Siobhan Coffey talks about her work in Laois Youth Theatre

Excited, chattering voices fill the hall, some new, some old, but all ready for the new season of Youth Theatre. A young man sits quietly alone. We form a rowdy circle, “our circle”, alphabetised by first name and set in stone for the season. The first exercise is to physically show how we are feeling by striking a pose, this is repeated at the close of the workshop with a second pose to show how we are then feeling. A word is sought to accompany the opening and closing pose. I watch and smile as this young man grows from “nervous” to “magnificent!” over the course of an hour and a half. Once again, I am reminded why I am passionate about being a Drama Facilitator.

In primary school, the nuns drilled us for Speech and Drama exams each year. I won two medals - I was going to be an actor! However, my acting career was short-lived – I attained a Teachers Diploma in speech and drama instead. I tried teaching the subject for a while, but it really didn’t excite me. I parked the drama thing until 2003, through a series of happenstance and an offer from the Laois Arts Office, I found myself assisting in a drama workshop. There was an immediate connection with the process – an instant recognition that this was my kind of drama! The following year, I became the Drama Facilitator for Stradbally Youth Theatre and my long-term relationship with drama truly began.

I continue to be a facilitator with Laois Youth Theatre. I have a huge energy for youth theatre and its young people and am continually excited by its possibilities. I believe in it – I see it work – I see the young people grow. Their creativity and expressive collaborations make me laugh, sometimes cry and sometimes, every other emotion in between.

Observing them perfect and excel in their art, I have felt my heart soar and ache in equal amounts over the years. Youth theatre has taken me on my own internal journey from “nervous” to “magnificent” - I have grown up within the workshop space. My practice, my artistic skills and my personal skills have all developed through drama facilitation - so I recognise its power.

My role as a drama facilitator is to lead the participants in play. It is structured play, with the games and exercises having built-in hidden objectives so that participants are not necessarily aware that whilst playing, they are developing both their drama and personal skills and interaction with others. The structure promotes cohesive group development, with life-long bonds being made and new ways of expressing yourself constantly being discovered. Drama facilitation fosters playfulness, and at best, inspires participants (and me) to make magic!

An essential companion on this journey, providing guidance, support and encouragement every step of the way, has been and continues to be NAYD. Their epic training sends me away each year, armed with the necessary tools and exciting fresh ideas. The youth theatre too, has benefited from its many programmes, the highlight being the National Festival of Youth Theatres, where participants get to meet, work and celebrate with youth theatres from all over Ireland.

My drama facilitation skills have broadened of late to include other playfulness projects:- “Stradbally PlayHouse”, an adult drama group, who are fully engaged in the playing and are continually surprised by the journey that drama is taking them

on; “PlayHouse Drama Club” for 8-12 year olds in Stradbally; An “After Schools Club” in Portarlinton where I facilitate drama workshops for Laois Arts Office and my latest drama adventure is with a group of adults with intellectual disabilities who are utterly fearless (unlike me, who was initially nervous) in their drama endeavours. My romance with drama continues...

All too soon, we’re conditioned to “grow up and stop play-acting”, my job, no matter what the age or ability, is to reverse that process and re-discover and enjoy our own playfulness. Often the focus in drama is on the product, the end-of-year performance, the school play etc. but the drama process itself is of huge importance and value – there can be no play without play!

Places available in 12-14 age category. A special reduced rate of €30 is now available up to the Summer break. For further information contact The Arts Office, Laois County Council on 057-8664033/13 or email: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie

No auditions necessary; just be up for a laugh! Interested? Come along on Saturdays between 10am and 11.30am to the Dunamais Arts Centre and give it a go! Explore drama through theatre games, get creative, learn about production; onstage, back stage and technical, while having fun, gaining confidence and making new friends. Meet other YT groups countrywide and see professional theatre at reduced rates. A special reduced rate of €30 is now available up to the Summer break (approx 2.50 pw). For further information contact; **the Arts Office, Laois County Council on 057 8664033/13 or email: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie**



keeping it CLASSICAL

by Patrick Conboy

Lovers of classical music in County Longford will soon be able to experience live performances of works by Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, and others, thanks to a new initiative currently being promoted by the county's Arts Office.

The recently established Classical Music Club will act as a gathering point for like-minded classical music aficionados, and will facilitate recitals.

"It's part of an integrated programme to revitalise the live music scene in Longford, and it follows on from the success we've had with our Jazz Club and Folk and Trad Club, the county's Arts Officer, Fergus Kennedy, reveals. "We're focusing on classical music now due to the wide interest in the genre throughout the county, which can be seen with groups such as the Longford County Choir and Innyside Singers."

At the outset, soloists and small ensembles will be invited to perform, but other elements will also be added to the programme.

"We would also like to introduce a facilitated element to the performances," Fergus says. "One example of this would be inviting a musicologist to speak beforehand about the composers and arrangements that will be featured. In doing that, we're hoping to provide a live music experience with the added value of educational content."

While no dates have yet been set, it is expected that the second half of the year will feature a busy schedule of events.

"We're planning on hosting performances in the Canal Studio in the Backstage Theatre initially, but the plan is to eventually stage performances throughout the county," Fergus concludes.

NURTURING LONGFORD'S EMERGING ARTISTS

Following on from the success of the 'Limerick's Longford Artists' exhibition at last year's Cruthú Arts Festival, Longford County Arts Office is currently making preparations to host an exhibition and development programme for students from the county who are currently studying fine art at third level.

"While researching for the arts graduates' exhibition at last year's Cruthú festival, the Arts Office was surprised to discover that students from Longford were studying at every arts college in the country," explains County Longford Arts Officer, Fergus Kennedy.

"So in an effort to support their development towards a professional artistic career after graduation, the Arts Office has decided to organise

an exhibition of work by current arts undergraduates at this year's Cruthú festival."

This exhibition will take place at a pop-up venue in Longford during this year's Cruthú Arts Festival, which takes place in the county town from July 23 to 26.

"In addition to exhibiting their work, the Arts Office will also co-ordinate a programme of

professional development, with workshops and lectures to assist the students in developing a professional career in the arts after graduation," Fergus continues.

"This event also affords an excellent opportunity for the Longford Arts Office to create a working relationship with a new generation of Longford artists, which we hope will continue for many years."

County ART Collections

County Arts Collections reside in public spaces and places all around the country. Here Áedín McGinn the manager of Luan Gallery, Ireland's newest municipal visual arts space describes what it means to have a county collection and how Luan is set to engage with the Westmeath Collection

Ireland is peppered with regional visual art collections which lie in the custodianship of local authorities. These art collections have been acquired throughout the years for the benefit of their local audiences and are capable of remarking on and reflecting their areas of origin.

These bodies of work, like other public art collections, are evolving snapshots in time which constantly develop and grow with each new acquisition attained. The collections respond to trends and concerns of times present and past and reflect various time periods in Irish history and in Irish art history.

The Westmeath County Art Collection is of definite quality and historic reference and is a highly valuable public resource. Housed primarily in the council buildings around the Westmeath region, it was first established by the County Development Officer Christy Kiernan in 1992 and the first ten years of the collection is thus named in his memory: 'The Christy Kiernan Collection'.

The collection was initially composed of images based on a Westmeath theme, created by artists who were living or working in Westmeath and the works dating from this era are heavily landscape

based. A selection of six images was compiled annually to create a calendar as an initiative to further the accessibility of the collection to the people of Westmeath. Cllr Michael Ryan the then Mayor of Westmeath County Council described the collection as:

'...captivating, stimulating and extremely valued within the realms of the local authority. Although the subject matter is varied each painting is united by the fact that it celebrates County Westmeath'.

In 2002 acquisitions to the collection were made following a county wide competition open to graduate and emerging artists linked to Westmeath. The successful commissioned art work was then added permanently to the county collection. A Westmeath theme was no longer a stipulation and as a result the collection broadened in terms of media and content.

The existence of this public collection forms a history to pass on and share with the future generations as it is foremost a living and visible resource.

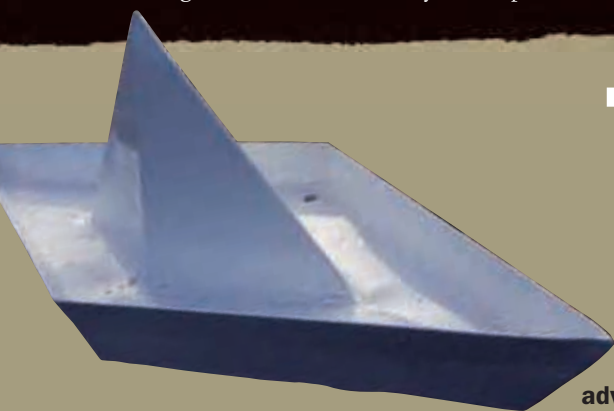
Luan Gallery in Athlone will be showcasing a selection of works drawn from the Westmeath



County Art Collection in spring 2015. This work is supplemented by work from the County Library collection. Since the 1950s Westmeath Library Service, under its then County Librarian Seamus O Conchubhair, has had a policy of acquiring works of art for display in its branch libraries. This policy was continued by his successors. A number of the more important purchases were made under a joint purchase scheme with the Arts Council.

Removing these works from their usual postings in libraries and offices and placing them once more in a gallery context reminds us of the wealth of skilled artistic talent in the county.

As new trends in the art world emerge, new media such as film and sound art, time based sculpture and temporary installation are added to the collection ensuring its representation of local artists and current art practices at local level continues. The Westmeath County Art Collection is a representation of local place and people and is truly a celebration of Westmeath.



The Paper Boat MYSTERY

Beginning life as a fleet of seven boats that call upon the wistful desire for adventure you sometimes get when watching a boat going out to sea, Amanda

Ralph's sculptures which were commissioned by Offaly County Council in 2000, mysteriously went missing for 14 years.

Arts Officer Sinéad O'Reilly said, "When I took up the post in 2005, I found a record of them having been commissioned, but nothing of what had happened to them subsequently. I had heard in conversation that the OPW removed them, but nothing further. In 2014, Amanda Ralph contacted us to ask if we knew anything about what had happened to the sculptures. We started to ask questions locally and discovered that the OPW were called to dredge the River Brosna in Clara, following the river rising considerably after a storm. Offaly County Council employee Dominic Fleming spotted the machine hauling the boats onto the riverbank. Rescuing five of the seven, he placed them in storage in Clara, waiting for someone to claim them. Around this time, the Arts Office in Offaly County Council was undergoing a change of personnel and somehow the fate of the rescued boats was overlooked."

Amanda assessed their condition and brought them to Arklow Marine Services where they had been originally engineered. "I was worried that there would

be nobody who would remember making them and we'd have difficulty in getting them restored, but Billy Tyrrell, a fifth generation boat builder, recollected them immediately. Arklow Marine Services are one of the leading boat builders in Ireland, so I imagine a project like this sticks in their minds".

While being restored, a new home was found for the remaining boats at Lough Boora Discovery Park in the context of its existing Sculpture Park. Speaking at their re-launch last January, writer and documentary maker Manchán Magan, said "Here we are, in one of the last parts of Ireland that the rest of the country has not cottoned onto yet, these endless vistas and broad skies and now these fragile boats, reminding us how we got here, our waterways were how our ancestors accessed the Midlands and our connection to boats as an island are a reminder of our fragility, our emigrants and our constant desire for adventure and discovery"

Francis Bacon's LAOIS RETREAT

On the outskirts of the village of Ballacolla near Abbeyleix, County Laois, there exists a strange cultural lacuna.

Notable now only by its absence, there once stood an edifice that beheld and administered many of the formative experiences that would shape the artist Francis Bacon. One would assume that for an artist of such renown, there would be some evidence of the country house once known as 'Farmleigh', yet it is nonexistent. Indeed, Bacon once stated, "I would like my pictures to look as if a human being has passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence," and now like a curious form of *damnatio memoriae*, any remnant or marker of this structure's existence – with the exception of a nearby coach house co-opted by a modern farmstead – has been excised from both the physical and mental landscape of the locality. Of course, considering Bacon's Anglo-Irish heritage, this is hardly surprising as the house perhaps represented the lingering shade of a colonial past – a similarly sad fate shared by many such genteel manors since independence.

Born at 63 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin in 1909,

Francis Bacon's early years seem to have been characterised by a sense of displacement or nomadism that would, in turn, inform the restlessness and many sojourns of later life. His father, the rather draconian disciplinarian and retired army officer known as Captain Eddy Bacon had a fondness for Ireland – particularly its hunting tradition – and had elected to move there from England with his wife Winnie in order to train horses – utilising her sizeable dowry. Establishing themselves at Cannycourt House near Kilcullen in County Kildare, they raised a family of five, of whom Francis was the second-eldest. With the onset of the First World War, Captain Bacon moved the family to London, where he was stationed at the Territorial Force Records Office. Life in the urban sprawl would prove inimical to the young Francis, however, and he longed for the verdant climes of his former home.

Upon returning to Ireland after the conflict, Francis was sent to live for a time with his maternal



by Thomas Byrne

grandmother, affectionately known as 'Granny Supple', at Farmleigh, Abbeyleix. It was here that he enjoyed a degree of freedom that was far-removed from the stifling influence of his father. In Granny Supple, he had a counsellor and a role model of sorts who fostered a desire within him to rail against social mores and conventions through her own – albeit innocuous – freewheeling lifestyle. It was also here that Francis would also be touched by his earliest artistic inspiration through exposure to the interesting architecture of this grand house – its large bay windows perhaps the fons et origo of his numerous triptych works. His step-grandfather, Kerry Supple, would prove integral to his development too as Kerry's position of District Inspector of the Royal Irish Constabulary made the family a target for Republican forces at the time and their numerous narrow escapes perhaps instilled a sense of mortality in the young Bacon.

Rosie hits all the RIGHT NOTES on new CD by Patrick Conboy

Last January saw a very special event taking place in Longford, as a large crowd turned out for Rosie Maguire as she launched her first album at a special concert held in the Longford Arms Hotel.

Entitled 'Rosie's Dream', it features some of Rosie's all-time favourite songs, along with some that were specially composed for the CD.

"It has 12 tracks," says Rosie, who is a service user at St Christopher's in Longford town. "It includes songs like 'Friend in Me', 'True Colours', and 'The Waters Divide'."

Rosie also received a helping hand from none other than former Eurovision Song Contest winner Charlie McGettigan, who was happy to supply her with some of his original compositions.

"Charlie gave me two songs that he wrote: 'Comfort in the Sun', and 'Heartstrings'," she reveals.

Recording an album had been a goal of Rosie's for a long time, and the staff at St Christopher's – including Angela Reynolds, Caroline Kelly, and Angela Cunningham – were on hand to help make it happen, while she has also received great support from her family.

"My sisters, Kathleen and Colette, raised funds to make the CD. We had an Irish night at Feerick's in Rathowen, and my brother-in-law Ken arranged a quiz night," Rosie continues. "I started singing when I was a child. My mother used to sing along to songs on the radio and she was very good, so I got it from her."

Making a record was the next natural step in Rosie's progress as a performer. She previously played with an orchestra at the Cope Foundation's Irish Performing Arts Festival at Cork City Hall in 2009, where she took first prize, and returned to the venue three years later to represent Ireland at the European Song Festival, gaining further recognition when she finished in third place.

"I have a habit of winning competitions," she laughs.

The recording process for 'Rosie's Dream' took place over several two-hour sessions on Mondays, with the help of another Eurovision songwriter, Paul Gurney.



"I recorded the album with Paul at Real World Studios," Rosie explains. "It was lots of fun, and we drank lots of tea."

Once the album was ready to go, it needed a special event to launch it, and the concert in the Longford Arms certainly had all the razzmatazz befitting such an occasion, with friends, family and fans turning out in force, along with several photographers, while artists from right across the midlands came along to entertain the audience.

"There were set dancers from Bunbrosna, Celtic Chique sang at it, and Ballynacargy Comhaltas were there. Charlie McGettigan also played, and so did The Dance On Band, and Pascal, Sean, Davey, and Liz."

However, it was Rosie's own headline performance that proved to be the high point of the evening.

"Making this CD proves that if you have a dream, you can do it," Rosie concludes.

artists

by Manchán
Magan

truffle pigs rooting

The midlands tend to be misunderstood – not just in Ireland, but everywhere. We find it easier to describe extremities than that nebulous region in which the outer blends with the core.

Misperceptions arise, negative stereotypes, which is definitely the case with the Irish Midlands. Are they in need in interpreting and do artists have a role to play?

"We are not the hand maidens of Fáilte Ireland if that's what you mean," says Teresa Doyle, an artist, raised on the Laois/Offaly border and now working in Westmeath. "We are infused and informed by this place, but that doesn't mean we have an obligation to explain it to others. For me the real potency of this area is along the by-roads - the quiet, uninterrupted world where people are living beautiful lives."

The slam poet, Marty Mulligan believes "the allure of the midlands is that it has been ignored for so long." He takes Americans seeking connection with the *real* Ireland up the Hill of Uisneach in Westmeath, in partnership with Justin Moffitt, former manager of The Blizzards. "The energy of these old places is untouched and pure. We had elders from the Nez Perce tribe come the whole way to Uisneach just to see the Cat Stone because of its significance to North American culture. And in 2016 the World Council of the Indigenous Grandmothers is coming to conduct their

ceremonies here because they feel this is where the real life force and energy is."

So, if the indigenous Grandmothers (!) rate the Midlands why do most Irish people dismiss them? "They're blinded by negative preconceptions," says Mulligan. "When I bring Americans up Uisneach and show them the Royal Palace dating from the 1st century AD, and Lough Lugh connected to the Sun God Lugh Lamfada of the Tuatha De Danaan, and the Catstone, an omphalos (naval stone) that marked the epicentre of Ireland, they are blown away. On this one site I can show them remnants of the Neolithic period, the Bronze Age, Iron Age and the arrival of St Patrick, right up to Daniel O'Connell and De Valera. Try to tell them that the Midlands are a blank slate and they'll laugh in your face."

As a poet and modern seanchaí Mulligan realises the importance of using his artistic skills to reinterpret our surroundings and present them in a new light. For Gary Robinson, a Longford-based artist, the midlands are more a raw material than a message to be communicated to others. He uses the land in a physical capacity; actually bringing in slabs of Longford pavement concrete and mounds

of earth from Carrigglass into the gallery. These artefacts are then combined with snatches of text from random conversations overhead on the streets of Longford in an attempt to convey the myriad faceted essence of the region, much as Joyce did with Ulysses. Robinson's intense focus on the local - painting a particular field or tree repeatedly over years - is an attempt to mine down to the universal that lies at the core of the midland experience. That said, he insists that there is something unique about the place. "If I go anywhere else I can feel the difference. The work would not be the same."

In an attempt to gauge other people's impression of the area he put an ad in the local papers asking them to donate a word that encapsulated Longford.

Marty Mulligan at Uisneach
© Lough Bishop House



The idea was for Robinson to act as a conduit for other people's impressions of his home county, rather than imposing his own. The list, which was projected on a screen in an old chemist in the town, was predictably varied: earthy, freedom, cairdiúil, mundane, home, uisce, parochial, tolerant, sham. Not perhaps the terms Fáilte Ireland would have chosen, but a fair representation.

Another Longford-born artist and engineer, Adrian Duncan, tries to interpret the county through its aesthetic sensibility. Now based in Berlin, Duncan considers bungalows a modern form of artistic midland expression. The stone and plaster cladding which people chose for their bungalows and the use of colour on plinths "reveals something about people's sensibility." He envisions a Bungalow Bliss Tour of Longford that would explore the influence of bungalow aesthetics on everything from Garda stations to schools and ESB substations. His photo work "My father's variation" documents his family's bungalow and its idiosyncratic variations on the standard: arrow slit windows like a Norman castle and a sitting room window reminiscent of a shop vitrine.

Bungalows and motorways are some of the more obvious changes to the Midlands landscape in recent decades: the result of economic growth that

at the enthusiasm that came through with each nomination." A Curragh rifle mound was nominated and a pub sinking into a bog and a Nepalese/Traveller cultural interaction project. "One woman selected the tiny village where she had gone to school, purely because in her whole life she had never encountered anywhere so beautiful."

In 2014 Keaveny worked with Offaly's Afghani and Syrian refugees, assisting them in creating art that explored the challenges and opportunities of relocation and shifting identities using traditional Afghani and Syrian crafts. says Keaveny. One of them captioned her artwork with the words, *We are used to living in a war zone so we really needed the peace of living in this town. It is so calm here, so beautiful.*

The Midlands as calm and beautiful are something most Irish people take for granted, and it can take the outsider perspective of an artist, or of an actual outsider from an entirely different culture, to highlight the fact. The exhibition of Afghani and Syrian artwork in Tullamore Library had a profound impact on locals, as they saw their locality re-appraised through different eyes. One of the refugees defined the Midlands simply as the chance for her children to "

Meehan, a former pavement artist, "from the leafy green seaward-facing suburbs of Dublin," took years to alter to life in Westmeath before she began to fully appreciate the wealth of the peat landscape and culture surrounding her. "Realising the deep, generational connection between people and the land here has been a profound journey. I count myself very fortunate to live in such a beautiful part of Ireland. I regularly walk up the timeless Hill of Maol and each time my artistic soul is nourished."

Meehan recognises there "is probably an onus on us to be involved with presenting the true identity of the midlands to outsiders. The sensitivity and perceptivity of artists is an valuable asset to bring to county planning and decision-making. Artists might have a role in developing sustainable tourism." That said, Meehan doesn't "really want to see commercial tourism taking over as it has done elsewhere."

The feeling is shared by artist, Teresa Doyle, "It's fine that we in the midlands are not valued from a commercial perspective. It's better that way. A new understanding of the region would be a valuable thing, but we shouldn't be expected to change to accommodate something we are not."

It is often artists who first begin to appreciate an overlooked area, followed inevitably by the rest of

out midland beauty?

has awakened the region from a century of stagnation and propelled by a rabbit-like rise in population. The old stereotype of an expanse of bogs, lakes, eskers and drumlins bordered by the Shannon and Sliabh Blooms is being transformed. For Rowena Keaveny, an artist from Birr, Co Offaly, the new settlers, both Irish and non-Irish, are key protagonists in this transformation. They move in full of hope and fresh attitudes, seeking to benefit from the potential of the region. "People are so passionate about where they live," says Keaveny who asked residents and visitors to Kildare in 2009 to name their favourite spot for the Hidden Wonders of Kildare project. "I was amazed

In Keaveny's contribution to the 2007 *Finding Portlaoise* project, she walked around Portlaoise carrying a placard with a blank piece of paper on it, a permanent marker and a camera, inviting people to verbalise how they felt about the region. "It was one of the most profound experiences I've ever had," she says. A parking warden simply wrote "Home", a Butcher wrote "Only for the Blow-ins Portlaoise would be a dead town", and a woman who hid behind her placard wrote "Portlaoise is very friendly. No taste in planning."

The new settlers find it takes time to see through the negative perspectives people have. Ursula

us, and it seems likely that such will be the case in the midlands. Already the area is attracting increased attention in terms of tourism and recreational potential. In 2013 CIE Tours International added, for the first time ever, a midlands destinations to its itinerary: Athlone and Glasson village. A first step perhaps away from the mono-focus of tourism on the coastline. The creation of the Luan contemporary art gallery on the Shannon and the renovation of Athlone Castle has begun the process of the Midlands becoming a destination – not just a stop on the way to somewhere else.

Teresa Doyle - Apron, 2011

Adrian Duncan - Substation





mundy

A PLEDGE TO MUSIC

Birr Theatre & Arts Centre is delighted to welcome home Mundy in a special fundraising performance in aid of Carrig National School on Thursday 23 April.

Since his outstanding debut album *Jellylegs* in 1996 which yielded such hit songs 'Gin and Tonic Sky' and 'To You I Bestow' which featured on the soundtrack for Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo & Juliet*, Mundy has toured extensively including performing for Barack Obama both in Ireland and at The White House.

The new single 'Shot In The Dark' gives a taste of his sixth studio album. For this he has teamed up with Youth, who also produced *Jellylegs*. Youth, one of the most experienced and talented UK producers, has worked with the likes of The Verve, Pink Floyd, Culture Club, Echo & The Bunnymen and Paul McCartney. The line-up for this recording included Mundy on guitar and vocals, Youth on bass, Eddie Banda on drums and Michael Rendall on keys, with some extra guitar lines from Simon Tong (The Verve, Gorillaz, Damon Albarn) and Michael Wadada (Suns Of Arqa) on sitar.

In recording this new album Mundy joined forces with Pledge Music, a direct-to-fan music platform which brings artists and fans together to share in the experience of music as it happens and gives an insight into the music like never before. Fans were able to pledge for a host of things including a pre-order copy of the album, personal guitar lessons, a show in their own house and an opportunity to get the guitar used live and in the studio signed and

sent to them! They also had access to exclusive updates on the progress of this project. Pledge Music passionately believes in providing fans with an unrivaled musical experience that is best in class. One of their founding principles is the belief in giving something back to local communities, which is why all artists on their platform are encouraged to donate a percentage of their project funds to a charity of their choice. Mundy feels that Pledge Music "is an exciting innovation and would encourage other artists to look into it".

Following *Jellylegs*, Mundy released the multi platinum *24 Star Hotel*, *Raining Down Arrows* and his first live album *Live and Confusion*. His 4th studio album, *Strawberry Blood*, was released in 2009 and *Shuffle* (2011) was a gorgeous ode to some of

Mundy's favourite songwriters and featured his versions of songs by greats like Tom Waits, Lucinda Williams, John Prine, Paul Simon and Gillian Welch, to name a few.

With well-known anthems, **July, Mexico, Galway Girl** and tunes from the new album, due out on 10th April, this promises to be a fantastic night. Booking and further information is available on (057) 9122911 and .

Celebrating Yeats in the Libraries of Westmeath

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay
and wattles made...*

Are these among the most famous lines in Irish poetry? Is Yeats one of the most quoted Irish Poets?

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Irish Nobel winning poet W. B. Yeats. Born in Dublin in 1865, Yeats was a prolific poet, playwright and author and was the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. He served as a Senator from 1922-28. He died at Roquebrune in the South of France in 1939. In September 1948, his body was returned to Ireland and he was laid to rest in Drumcliff churchyard in Sligo.

Westmeath County Library Service is delighted to take up the invitation of Aodhán Ó Riordáin, Minister of State in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to become involved in the Yeats 2015 celebration. This aims to place Yeats at the centre of cultural life in Ireland this year.

So drop into your local Westmeath Library this year and check out our "Poem of the month", a year long promotion which will see a different poem by Yeats chosen for display. The poem chosen last month was "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven".

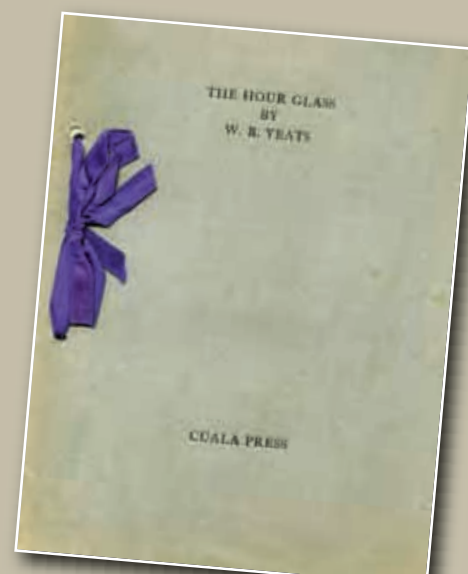
We also hope to become involved in the Yeats audio archive project, contributing to this national project where individuals can record their own reading of their favourite Yeats poem and upload it to the website. In May the award-winning poet, Noel Monahan will give a talk on Yeats and Kavanagh in both Athlone and Castlepollard libraries. Watch your local library notice boards and websites for further details.

In the autumn we will be hosting a special Yeats Exhibition in the Aidan Heavey Library, Athlone based on some of the gems in the Aidan Heavey Collection which is a specialist collection of material of Irish interest. The exhibition will include some rare first editions of Yeats publications including a number of items which were published in editions limited to only 50 copies. It will include signed copies and also material illustrated by his brother, the artist, Jack B. Yeats. The poet's sisters Susan and Elizabeth Yeats were involved with the Dun Emer Guild in Dublin founded by the artist Evelyn Gleeson. Elizabeth Yeats looked after the printing department which produced limited edition books under the Dun Emer Press imprint. Later the sisters were involved in the Cuala Press continuing the high standards set by Dun Emer, here they had their brother W.B. Yeats as their literary editor. The exhibition will include material from both the Dun Emer and Cuala Press

imprints together with an inscribed copy of W.B. Yeats 'Last Poems and Plays' which was published in 1940, inscribed from Hilton [Edwards] to Micheál [MacLiammoir].

As part of the celebrations, Westmeath Libraries and Arts Office will be challenging teenagers to draw inspiration from the words of W.B. Yeats to create art pieces. The evocative nature of Yeats poetry lends itself to visual reinterpretations. Details of this competition to follow.

So make 2015 all about Yeats. Why not reacquire yourself with old favourites or explore his lesser known works. It is entirely fitting that we should celebrate the work of one of our most inspirational poets whose impact, through the Celtic Revival movement, continues to reverberate today.





LSM trip to SCOTLAND

Laois School of Music Orchestra were delighted to receive an invitation from a Music School in Aberdeen, Scotland, to undertake a 4-day tour, performing for Primary, Secondary Schools and Community Groups.

Travelling over St. Patrick's weekend, the Orchestra have a 40-minute varied programme that includes Irish, Scottish, Classical and Popular Music, and have weekly rehearsals in the true spirit of getting ready to bring a tour on the road. It is an exciting venture for the School of Music, and on St. Patrick's Day itself, the group play at an Irish Festival in a school in Peterhead before adding to the festivities in Aberdeen Airport, en route home to Laois.

The group is 35 in total and includes students, parents and tutors of LSM from various parts of County Laois. It is anticipated that a group from the

Music School in Aberdeen will make a return visit to Laois in October/November of this year.

A tour such as this involves flights, accommodation and transport, so Fundraising played a major part in the overall preparation for the tour. The fund was kick-started by the IAYO Achievement Award of €1000 which LSM Orchestra won in February 2015 and has been building steadily since with several performances, bag-packing and a Grand Draw!

A great way to celebrate our National Feast Day with our Celtic neighbours!

Taking poetry outdoors



Longford looks set to be a hive of artistic activity this summer, and among the highlights will be a special Poetry Outdoors Workshop with Noel Monahan.

The Granard native is a well known and respected poet and playwright, and is a past winner of the RTÉ PJ O'Connor Award and the Irish Writers' Union Poetry Award, among many other accolades, while his poetry is prescribed for the Leaving Certificate curriculum.

Coinciding with the Cruthú Arts Festival, which takes place from July 23 to 26, the workshop will feature field trips where participants will be encouraged to connect with, and draw inspiration from, the landscape around them.

"The idea was originally pitched by the Arts Officer in Longford, Fergus Kennedy, and it's something we've been planning for two years because a certain amount of thought and preparation was involved," Noel explains.

Areas along the shores of Lough Ree such as Lanesborough and Newtowncashel will be among the sites the workshop will focus on, and Noel is certain the surroundings can provide an endless stream of poetic inspiration, pointing out that his

latest collection, 'Where the Wind Sleeps' focuses on such places.

"South Longford is full of hidden treasures that have been neglected somewhat," he continues. "There's a huge amount of subject matter: bogland, lakes, islands, woodlands, the flora and fauna, historic ruins, the breadth of natural colours... even the placenames! If you go to monastic ruins, for example, you will be amazed at how the energy of the place gets to you."

Noel hopes the time spent visiting such locations will nurture artistic freedom and will engage participants directly in discovering new and unexpected subject matter which can be put to use during the indoor component of the workshop.

"Such an approach will lead to a discovery of the wonder of the place and will open up a new vision and new intelligence for the writers," he adds. "It's not just writing about nature, it's about a much deeper philosophical journey. I have been doing this myself and I'm happy to share it with other people.

I'm looking forward to it."

Booking and pricing information for the Poetry Outdoors Workshop will be available from County Longford Arts Office's website for writers, www.virtualwriter.ie, from the first week in May. Early booking is advised. For further enquiries, contact Longford County Arts office on 086 8517595.



ENCORE

Claire O'Brien was raised in Mountmellick, Laois on a diet of library books and plays at the local annual drama festival. A freelance journalist and broadcaster, she's been presenting Midlands 103's Encore arts show for more than five years and loves every minute of it.



It may have come as a surprise to some readers of the *Irish Times* late last summer that the Midlands is not, despite rumours to the contrary, a cultural wasteland. Those of us who live in these rich, deep and boggy quarters have simply been waiting for the rest of the country to cotton on. As presenter and producer of Midlands 103's weekly *Encore* arts programme, I've known for quite a while just how vibrant, creative and progressive the arts community in Laois, Offaly and Westmeath is.

While Manchán Magan's article had space for just a handful of examples, I have the pleasure, and the responsibility, of showcasing as many as possible every Thursday night. A typical programme might include a vivid behind-the-scenes look at a musical or play rehearsal, some live music, a book review or a package or interview with a writer, artist, performer...

Encore has brought to the local airwaves everyone from touring performers like Druid and Donal O'Kelly to Laois Open Door Theatre; from Mullingar's internationally renowned tenor Emmet Cahill to Laois trad group Cua; from sculptor Marie Foley at Luan to the fourth class girls at St Joseph's National School talking about their stunning Little Women art project guided by Gemma Guihan.

Therein lies the challenge...Midlands 103 is the most listened to radio station in these counties and that's

equally a curse and a blessing. Listeners expect support for local artistic and cultural endeavours, whether it's an event in their local hall or one of national import. But they also expect the same high quality programming that national radio provides with a fraction of the budget and a more diverse listenership.

Finding material to cover on the programme is pretty easy. It's harder to create and maintain a format that keeps the listener tuned to the kind of contemporary music that might feature at the Hilltown Music Festival, for example, and follow that with poems by novices from a workshop in one of the biggest housing estates outside Dublin and a piece on the Electric Picnic or Foundation 14.

It's that variety that keeps me interested. While there are annual events that get a regular mention, there's always something new – a theatre project for intellectually disabled teens in Offaly, a new book of poems from Westmeath's John Ennis, described by Seamus Heaney as Ireland's most underrated poet.

But our community is nothing without our amateur arts. In Offaly there is hardly a parish without an active drama group. In Westmeath the number and quality of visual artists is astounding. Laois does all of this as well as turning out superb musicians and singers. There's a magical symbiosis when the amateur creative attends professional touring theatre productions, modern art exhibitions or installations

at the Luan, or literary readings at the Laois Leaves Festival. Artistic excellence begins with the curiosity of the amateur or the ordinary person.

So we keep developing the programme and our alliances with the community. Last year we won a Silver PPI radio award for drama for *Meat and Blue WKD*, the winning play in Birr's Scripts playwriting festival. Late last year we broadcast *Home*, written by Kate Heffernan as part of a residency at Dunamaisie theatre in Portlaoise.

The Fifth Thursday slot (four each year) gives a full programme to the life and work of someone like Westmeath's John Ennis, or Offaly filmmaker Paddy Slattery, who views his physical paralysis as the necessary spur to his creative life, or follows the current residents and their work at the Arthouse in Stradbally.

For last year's RTE All-Ireland Drama Festival we created an archive of radio pieces encapsulating the ten plays seen over the course of the festival. They've been heard all over the world. In theory *Encore* is "just an hour" of my week. In practice it takes much, much more. But the reward is the most exhilarating, inspiring, entertaining hour of my week. And hopefully yours. **Tune into *Encore* on Midlands 103 each Thursday at 7pm**

SAIBHREAS

The Laois Arthouse presents *Saibhreas*, an exhibition about the Midlands at Damer House, Roscrea, Co Tipperary. The exhibition opens on Saturday 11 April.



The title of the exhibition *Saibhreas* - means wealth or treasure in Irish. The exhibition will consider a number of themes including landscape, history, folklore, people and modernism and will include film, sculpture, painting and photography. Exhibiting artists include Martin Gale, Nick Miller, Cathy Carmen, Jock Nichol, Ken Wardrop, Lisa Fingleton, Vera Mc Evoy, Simon Burch, Eoin Ó Conaill, Nuala Hayes, Rita Duffy and others to be confirmed.

Saibhreas can also be seen at the Dunamaisie Arts Centre, Portlaoise in June.

The curator for the exhibition is Muireann Ní Chonaill, Arts Officer and Manager of the Laois Arthouse, Stradbally, Co Laois. Muireann recently completed an MA at the IADT. She curated the Nick Miller residency entitled *Sitting*, which took place in July 2014 at the Laois Arthouse. After graduating in Arts Management from UCD 25 years ago, she worked as House Manager in Damer House and is delighted to return there with this show.

If you go down to the Woods...

Jock Nichol will be taking up a month-long residency in the Laois Arthouse in July/August 2015. Over the course of the residency Jock will paint in the Stradbally area, conduct workshops, exhibit the work undertaken over the course of the month and conduct public talks on his residency, which will be open free to the public

The residency is curated by Arts Officer Muireann Ní Chonaill. "We are delighted to that Jock is joining us for the month-long residency at the Laois Arthouse. It will give Jock the chance to consider the surrounding landscape of Stradbally. It will offer the public the opportunity to engage with Jock as an artist and teacher and we look forward to seeing the paintings which will result. I hope it will inspire many people."

From 20th to 24th July as part of its artist's residency programme, the Laois Arthouse, Stradbally, are delighted to host an intensive "Plein Air" drawing and painting workshop week long residency, by Jock Nichol. The week-long programme will run daily from 10am until 3.00pm. Growing up in the shadow of the Cheviot Hills in the Scottish Borders, gave Nichols an early fascination and curiosity about the landscape – especially marginal lands, where evidence of man-made interventions co-exist in an uneasy balance with nature. Since moving to the Irish Midlands in 1991, the open spaces of the bog and forests of the Slieve Bloom Mountains have become the focus of working outside central to his practice. Being immersed in the constantly changing sights and sound of the environment encourages a more intuitive and receptive response to the subject, honing observational skills and infusing the work with a subliminal sense of the surroundings.

Through his work Nichol tries to find the "essence" of a particular place which has become very familiar through repeated observation, yet still never ceases to surprise.

However, this can be a very solitary process, so he is very excited at the prospect of working alongside others in an environment of mutual support and encouragement, exchange of ideas, and informal criticism.

He relishes the opportunity to explore the stunning man-made and natural heritage of the Stradbally area. Focussing on the woodland, participants in the workshop will look at many aspects and possibilities within the chosen location. From the complex vastness of the forest to the delicacy of the detail of such things as leaves, the feast of textures, such as moss or bark, how light, colour and shadow constantly change, everything, from the forgotten hidden corners and mysterious stones, animal tracks, to trails and paths of "designated", "recreational" areas.

Only when we open our eyes and begin to look do we really see the true nature of the place, beyond the superficial or picturesque.

Various approaches to drawing and painting will be encouraged, instruction will be tailored to the requirements of the individual, the emphasis being

on each person developing their own personal response to the landscape. Alongside an exhibition of Jock Nichol's landscape paintings an exhibition of selected work will take place at the Laois Arthouse.

Participants will be expected to provide their own sketch books, easels, canvas, and media of choice, whether acrylic, oils, watercolour, pastel etc. They will also be expected to look after their own transport and food.

Places are strictly limited at a cost of €50 for 5 days, and are open to adults, from beginner to expert, who have an interest and passion for art and the great outdoors.

So if you like picnics, have art materials, boots, rain jacket or sun block, and a sense of adventure, why not contact the Laois Arthouse or go on line to www.laoisarts.ie for an application form.

This project is funded by the Percent for Art Scheme and Laois County Council.

For further information and images please contact Muireann Ní Chonaill at mnichona@laoiscoco.ie or telephone: 0578664109/057864174

Twitter: @ArthouseLibrary

facebook: [facebook.com/arthouseandlibrary](https://www.facebook.com/arthouseandlibrary)





Pigs on Parade

Pigs on Parade - artist Paul Roy talks to Westmeath arts office about his involvement in the innovative Jack and Jill charity project.

Picture the scene: 100 life size pigs, are sent around the country to various artists, who paint/alter/decorate them... the finished pigs are then spread across various public locations in Dublin City, and there is a Piggy trail for the viewer to follow...

Paul Roy's pig is named Lou as Paul was listening to some Velvet Underground albums whilst executing the artwork and it was also on the anniversary of Lou Reed's death.

The appearance of The pig itself, black background on which a multitude of silver 'hairs' gave Lou form, and is based on Paul's research where he looked at wild pigs which once populated Ireland, their image often depicted in the black and white line work of woodcut

printing. As Paul is also a printmaker, he used this interesting starting point bringing it right through into the overall visual inspiration for Lou.

The intention is that the pigs will ultimately go for auction for charity, however there is also the pre-auction option to buy the pigs for a set price. Lou has thus been purchased outright by an Irish insurance company which means that the charity will receive €5000 for the pig, with a nominal fee and material expenses going to the artist.

Artist Paul Roy will be exhibiting in the Luan Gallery, Athlone during summer of 2015.

Patrick's Day

Mullingar director and writer Terry McMahon receives deserved recognition on the International film circuit with his highly original and provocative feature film *Patrick's Day*.

The film premiered at the SXSW festival in March, then went on to win Best Irish Feature at the Galway Fleadh, also securing three awards at the Woodstock Film Festival (New York). Journalist and author Dermott Hayes sums up the film on a facebook posting explaining in his own words why this is an important film. And why we need to go and see it.

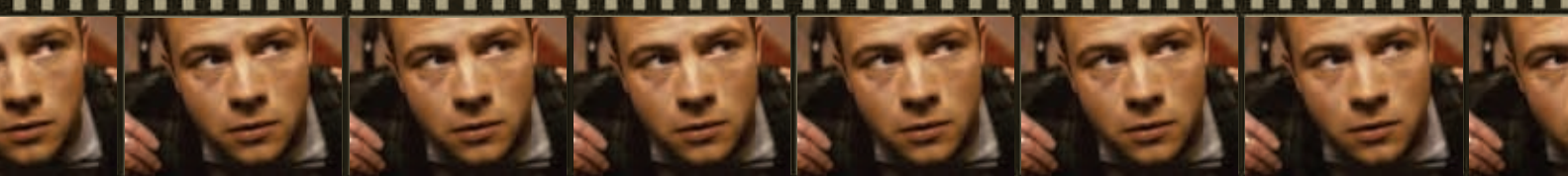
"Go see Patrick's Day...I had a ticket for the first night in the IFI but stayed behind in the bar with Philip Jackson, Terry McMahon and Moe Dunford. So I sneaked in, quietly, to the afternoon show, the following day.

In some ways, this film scared the living jaysus out of me; in another way, it made me laugh, it made my heart sore, it made me sad. It was only when I left the cinema and was sitting quietly, with a cup of tea, that I realised I'd been and seen a rare thing, a film that got me involved from when I sat down to long after I left. So much so, I have to see it again.

The performances are incredible in that same way that you become totally involved with them and their dilemmas; you invest total belief in them. I can't single any out since this film is a symphony, with superb soloists, like Moe Dunford, Kerry Fox and Catherine Walker. But there are supporting players like Philip Jackson, the English Garda and all the others who invest

so much in their roles, 'support' hardly does them justice. And this applies too to the production; cinematography, wardrobe, locations; nothing was or is left to chance. Much of this must be laid at the feet of director and writer, Terry McMahon, a scholar of film, a guru of communication and a professor of the written word. This a film not, I believe, about mental illness but one that will shake the foundations of your beliefs regarding mental illness and even change them".

Tito's Dead, a novel by Dermott Hayes is available through all the usual outlets, Amazon (print and digital), iTunes, Barnes & Noble, Smashwords, Goodreads, Sony.



Longford leading the way with new portrait competition



Longford County Arts Office recently announced it is to facilitate a nationwide photographic portrait competition, exhibition and salon, which will take place during the Cruthú Arts Festival in late July.

Open to amateurs, students, and professional photographers alike, the competition's focus is very much on creativity, and it is the latest of a series of events to be announced in what is turning out to be a busy summer programme of arts-related events in County Longford.

"We're looking for something special – not just a straightforward studio shot," reveals Shelley Corcoran, who is co-ordinating the new project alongside County Longford Arts Officer, Fergus Kennedy.

"First and foremost it's an artistic competition with a creative, expressive dimension, and we want to see a concept and artist's statement from the entrants," she continues.

"The judging panel will consist of three experienced, professional photographers, and the exhibition will take place as part of Cruthú, which is happening on July 23 to 26."

SCRIPTS

MAKING WAVES IN THE WIRELESS WORLD

by Angela Ryan Whyte

Scripts - Ireland's Playwriting Festival made an exciting debut by winning an award and becoming quickly established with links made with The Abbey Theatre, the Irish Writer's Centre, Listowel Writer's Week and now RTÉ Drama on One. Not bad for its first year!

One of the success stories from the inaugural festival was the production of a radio play *Meat and Blue Wicked* which was co-produced with Midlands 103 Radio and went on to be nominated for a PPI Radio Award (the Oscars of Irish Radio!) and took home the Silver PPI Award for Drama. With experienced heavyweight producers of Radio Drama such as RTÉ Radio 1 and BBC Radio in the shortlist, this was a huge coup for Scripts and Midlands 103.

Meat and Blue Wicked (written by Gillian Greer, directed by George B. Miller and performed by Angela Ryan Whyte) is a beautifully written stark and disturbing account of a young girl's experience of date rape and the play was a hit with audiences of the Encore Arts Show, when it premiered in September 2013. The topic took hold and the debate continued on the Will Faulkner Show with representatives from the Rape Crisis Centre taking part in a discussion on the issues raised by the play.

Scripts 2015 takes place this April with the theme **Wild for the Wireless** which will follow its focus on radio drama. In October 2014, playwrights began submitting 15 minute radio plays on the topic "A Bump in the Road" for selection. Three lucky playwrights have been chosen to develop their scripts with mentor Eugene O' Brien and over a three day workshop process (15-17 April) the playwrights will hone their scripts

On Saturday 18 April all three new plays will be performed by actors in a live recording at Birr Theatre & Arts Centre. Audiences will get an insight into the



Angela Ryan Whyte, Siobhan Donnellan and Jack Gilligan Chair of the Irish Writers Centre

making of a radio play, seeing sound effects, directorial choices and possibly even getting their own parts to play! RTÉ Drama On One Producer, Kevin Brugh will lead a discussion on the making of a radio play and will provide analysis and feedback on all three plays before announcing the winner. The prize, sponsored by RTÉ Radio 1, sees the winning playwright go on to complete a follow up workshop with the renowned Jesper Bergmann, Dramaturg for both Drama On One and the Royal Theatre, Denmark. This workshop will include one-to-one sessions with Jesper and further directions for each writer's script.

Young people will also have the opportunity to learn the skills of radio drama with the *Wee Wild for the Wireless Workshop*, an interactive workshop for 13 - 20 year olds. Young writer's can submit their 15 Minute plays to scriptsireland@gmail.com for consideration and one play will be worked on throughout the workshop, taking place on Friday 17th April 2015 7-9 p.m.

To book either event contact the Birr Theatre & Arts Centre Box Office at 057 91 22911, all tickets are €10. *Scripts* is co-produced by Birr Theatre & Arts Centre and Jasango Theatre and is supported by Offaly County Council.
www.scriptsireland.com
www.facebook.com/scripts
scriptsireland@gmail.com

Saidhbhín GIBSON

Laois Arthouse Artist in Residence May 2015

Visual artist Saidhbhín Gibson has been awarded a three-month bursary at the Laois Arthouse. She will take up residency in May. Saidhbhín will work with the pupils of Cosby National School, Stradbally and together examine the flora and fauna of the locale. The accumulative findings will be developed with the pupils.

Saidhbhín is based in the south-east of Ireland and is currently studying for a M.F.A. at N.C.A.D., Dublin. She has exhibited on two occasions in The Arthouse; in 2013, she had a solo show, "Make good, make better" and in 2014 she was part of the group show "Work from Middle".



Laois Arthouse, Stradbally



STUDIOS AND APARTMENTS NOW AVAILABLE AT THE LAOIS ARTHOUSE, COURT SQUARE, STRADBALLY, CO LAOIS.

Facilities include: Artists Studios, Residential accommodation, Exhibition Space, Rehearsal Space, Kiln, Garden, Digital Facilities, Public Library. State of the Art Studios and residential apartments – at very good rates. Application form available contact: Muireann Ni Chonaill, Arts Officer, Laois County Council Tel: 057: 8664109/8664033 or email: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie For more information visit the website: www.arthouse.ie

CALLING EXHIBITION PROPOSALS FOR 2015/2016

Expressions of interest for exhibitions in the Gallery and in the outdoor Garden area are now invited. A contribution of €100 is available to support artists exhibiting. The indoor exhibition space has a hanging system and the outdoor area is an enclosed garden with a feature wall with a mounted public artwork. The exhibition programme also includes opportunities for artists to conduct talks and tours of work. Application form, details and maps available online www.arthouse.ie or Tel: 057: 8664109/8664033 or email: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie

JOHN COUNT McCORMACK

Born John Francis McCormack in the Bawn, Athlone, Co. Westmeath on 14th June 1884, Athlone's favourite son reached worldwide fame as a tenor, performing unique repertoire, combining classical music, folk ballads, and singing sacred music.

McCormack's concerts drew sell-out crowds worldwide in the most prestigious venues among them Carnegie Hall and Covent Garden. His career was also a huge financial success; recordings sold in the millions and at the height of his career he was reputed to be earning £200,000 per annum.

Luan Gallery, Athlone's contemporary visual art gallery was the venue for a number of early concerts by John McCormack, including a Grand Concert in November 1903 where McCormack first shared the concert platform with his future wife the soprano, Lily Foley. The gallery building is an impressive renovation (2012) of an existing historic building, known locally as the Father Mathew Hall.

Interestingly the new sculpture in the Civic Square has McCormack in a much more relaxed pose than that which we might be used to, and artist Rory Breslin has captured that sense of McCormack being 'at home' perfectly. McCormack's pose draws heavily on the famous Sir William Orpen painting bought by the National Gallery of Ireland in 2009, in which the singer is in a crumpled white suit and open shirt collar. By all accounts artist and sitter had tried out several different modes of dress, including formal evening dress, but all proved unsatisfactory until one afternoon in the summer of 1923, John came in from the tennis court, picked up a piece of music and went to the piano. Orpen decided then and there to paint him in tennis togs with the music in his hand.

But the impressive sculpture is not the only McCormack story in town. Yes, his significant presence is now inescapable in the civic square, and he is located only a stone's throw from his birthplace, but in addition the Square has been renamed to **John Count McCormack Square**. This is also the starting point of a new walking route showing areas of the town directly associated with the famous tenor. And a new exhibition dedicated to McCormack recently opened at Athlone Castle.

Add this to the existing bust of McCormack along the Shannon, next to the Luan Gallery and it becomes clear that Athlone is a town that is genuine in its commitment to keeping the memory of John Count McCormack alive and well.

Sitting

by Muireann Ní Chonaill
Laois Arts Officer & Curator of Sitting

A 79 year old man who lives around the corner from the Laois Arthouse had his portrait painted by Nick Miller as part of the *Sitting* residency. Upon seeing his portrait, he declared, "no one ever did that for me before". That to me is the satisfaction of facilitating public engagement. Once the preserve of the rich and famous, the opportunity to have one's portrait done was afforded to all through the *Sitting* project at the Laois Arthouse. This was an important chance for the public to encounter one of Ireland's foremost contemporary painters. To be in an artists' studio is a rare experience, usually only witnessed by those directly involved in the arts. This residency gave a glimpse into the working life of the artist, offering the opportunity to experience the process and see the results of the encounter one hour later. The sitters' became the exhibits.

The Laois Arthouse is a place of work for artists. It is also a place where the public and the artist can meet. The establishment of the Laois Arthouse opened a door for me as a Curator and has afforded me the opportunity to be the collaborator on a number of diverse residencies.

I have admired Nick Miller's work for a long time. His landscapes were my introduction to his practice. He also paints portraits. His portraits, striking in their honesty and certainly not designed to appeal to the vanity of the sitter are characteristically adventurous and again take a different approach to the norm.

When I invited Nick Miller to come to the Laois Arthouse for a residency we decided on portraiture, offering a one hour encounter between Miller and the sitters to be captured in watercolour. Over a number of months we planned the residency. The invitation was put out to the public to apply for a sitting through local media and social media. The sitters were easy to find. The slots were given out on a first-come-first-served basis and there was no trouble filling the places. Students of art, curious local people and art admirers from further afield became the subjects. As well as the watercolour portraits I invited Sculptor Cathy Carmen and Writer Pat Boran

to sit for Nick Miller for a day, have their portrait painted in oil, enriching the Laois County Art Collection by adding them as a lasting legacy to Miller's residency and a tribute to these important Laois-born figures in Irish culture.

They graciously accepted the invitation to sit. In the weeks running up to the residency we readied the Laois Arthouse. I invited Film Maker/Documentarian, Lisa Fingleton, to document the residency. She chronicled a number of days, placing herself unobtrusively in a corner of the Studio with her camera and captured the essence of the *Sitting* residency. The final day had a celebratory feel with families and friends of the sitters gathering to admire the portraits.

The opportunity to sit for a portrait or simply to view the work created, brought many new people to the Laois Arthouse. We were fortunate to host Nick Miller for the *Sitting* residency. It was a project which engaged with many people: the majority encountering the artists' studio for the first time. It offered an insight into the work of one of Ireland's foremost artists.

The Laois Arthouse became a receiving house for a number of Miller's portraits from the National Collection, IMMA, and a welcome opportunity to engage meaningfully with the national institution. Five of Miller's large portraiture works were displayed in the Gallery and elsewhere on the ground floor, offering an interesting insight into Miller's practice. Arriving, a number of weeks before the residency the portraits set the scene for things to come becoming the backdrop for the impending residency.

Nick Miller was revealed as the winner of the 2014 National Gallery of Ireland's prestigious Hennessy Portrait Prize. Chosen from a shortlist of 12, he received €15,000 plus a commission worth €5,000 to produce a portrait for inclusion in the National Portrait Collection. The 12 finalists were shortlisted from about 400 entries. We congratulate Nick Miller on this great achievement.



St. Brigid's Cloak

Saint Brigid's Cloak – artist and storyteller Paul Timoney shares his own unique perspective of this local project

I was involved in a tremendously exciting project recently with the pupils of Saint Brigid's school. We made a book titled *Saint Brigid's Cloak*, a beautifully written and illustrated book. I can say that from a humble stance, knowing that I did not draw any of the pictures or contribute anything to the text. The children did all that. I devised the project though, and I was the facilitator-teacher-man, and I assembled the book on my computer, and I have helped to sell over 300 copies of the book since its launch at Christmas. We sold over 200 in two days at The Magical Christmas Mullingar Market, raising over €2000 towards the purchase of a new school bus...so I am not completely without boast. Not completely at all.

Many people came back the second day of the market with surprised looks still clamped onto their beauty-filled faces from the night before, when they had actually gotten around to reading the book, and realising how amazing and funny and splendid and weird and hilarious it is. So, if you haven't already read the book, then you probably should, for your own sake. It will lift your spirits.

I feel very lucky to have been a part of the project. I was only saying to friend of mine the other night that if I was about to have my head chopped off, thinking about the *Saint Brigid's Cloak* Book might be something I would do to save my anxiety. I would be working on an escape plan too of course. I just mean if the situation got really hopeless. Anyway, the point is that I think it is one of the most important things in my life to help others to express themselves freely and creatively, and to find out who they are and what the world can be via the things that they make. Which is sort of the opposite to chopping someone's head off. It is establishing a safe space where the contents of attached, live heads can be explored and celebrated.

And then you see...I think that by doing that for other people, you as an art-person-maker-man-or-woman yourself, can find your own bit of freedom too.



New John Count McCormack sculpture, in newly named John McCormack Square

John Count McCormack exhibition in Athlone Castle

A Place Called Home

Virtual Classroom's innovative music project 'A Place Called Home' puts Westmeath on the map in Georgia, USA

A Westmeath school and a local musician are putting Irish music on the map in the State of Georgia, USA through an innovative project funded by the Ireland Funds. "A Place Called Home" has been devised by a unique Midlands learning company, Virtual Classroom. This programme allows students in Georgia, USA, to take a virtual walk through the Midlands of Ireland's history and culture in a collaborative online learning environment and celebrates both the Irish cultural legacy and the contemporary artistic connections that exist so strongly today between the United States and Ireland. Local development company, Atlantic Corridor co-ordinated the pilot which included students from schools in Georgia and Ard na Grath. The participating project instructors were provided from Ireland and they developed the content which is delivered to American classes. This content is directly aligned to existing primary school curriculum standards for music, language, arts, history, and social studies. HD video conferencing is being used to connect the schools, the artists and the subject-matter experts in a 'virtual classroom' approach.

The schools taking part are located in Barrow County, Atlanta and are Holsenbeck Elementary School, Yargo Elementary School and Auburn Elementary School. The Irish school is Ard na

Grath National School, Athlone. Further links are currently being developed by the Virtual Classroom to provide Irish music classes in other parts of Georgia, USA. James Donohoe, participating music teacher and founder of 'Virtual Classroom Ltd' says "This project adds real value for students, particularly those with an interest in cultural themes and these two communities have a shared history and students can really bond through the arts."

The project was recently featured in Connect; the official magazine of The Worldwide Ireland Funds which is published twice annually. The magazine reaches a unique audience that includes over 30,000 corporate, cultural and political leaders in the 12 countries in which The Worldwide Ireland Funds are active. Further information is available on www.virtualclassroom.ie.



The Midnight Court Episode

The Midnight Court is a participatory and performance practice that artist Maeve Collins has been involved with since 2011.

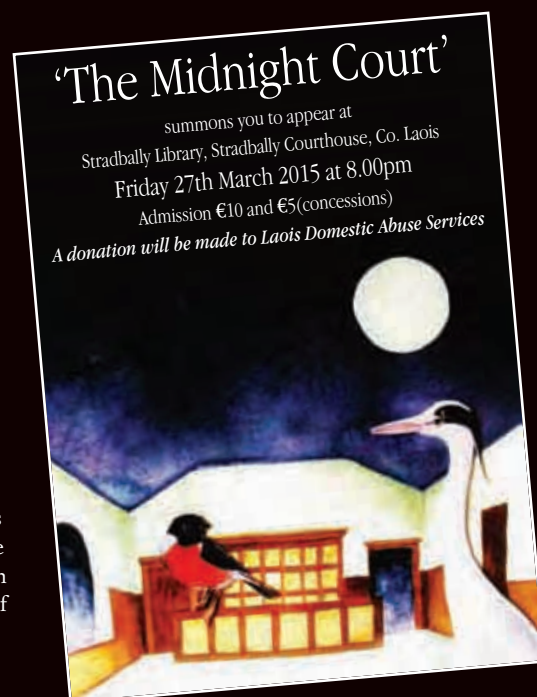
This episode will see the Midnight Court emerge in Stradbally Art House with an invited or summoned audience, as you prefer. It involves a reworking of the great literary and comic Aisling poem by the same name, written by Brian Merriman in the 18th century. Although an Aisling poem Merriman's is like no other, and this episode engages with the poem's lack of regard for stereotypes, its irreverent, bawdy humour yet none offensive tone and its affirmation of the rights of women to wholesome sex to open up an earthy conversation while having great fun in a contemporary setting. For one evening Stradbally Art House will return to its original function as Courthouse where Queen Aoibheal, Celtic Goddess and faerie will preside over systems of natural and man made justice involving gender relations and equality. Through active participation the audience will be invited at their digression to give evidence through the lines of the poem and as witnesses for the event. In this way it is hoped to bring into performance the 'what goes without saying', such as the cup of tea with its double meaning of 'the has not been said' through this unexpected encounter.

Including time for tea, this encounter, like no other runs for approx 1 hour and a quarter. Maeve is grateful to Laois Art's office for supporting this event.

This episode of the Midnight Court follows after an episode that opened up room for dwelling on public feelings into judicial sittings in a family sitting room in Abbeyleix and involved collaboration with Laois Domestic Abuse Services. The Midnight Court has taken many forms and has also been hosted with various ages and genders in collaboration with artist Marie Connole, Clare County Council and St. Mary's Community Centre Limerick among others.

Maeve Collins is a socially engaged art practitioner, researcher and facilitator. Currently studding for her MA in social practice and creative environments, she is researching various systems of justice and ways of intervening in these through processes of engaging with empathy and error. The Midnight Court is one of her research methodologies and she hopes to continue this practice in County Laois through episodes that are linked to cultural and judicial sites and with community members who are interested in collaborating. Although Maeve has been living in Clare for the past 7 years, she was born in Laois and is grateful to the empowering people she met in Laois such as LDAS while a member of Laois Amnesty International who helped her aspire to bring 'The Court' to Laois.

Website: www.maevecollins.net





Silhouette

The Council Adopted a Decision on Financial Assistance to Ireland and a Recommendation Setting out the Conditions for Granting that Assistance – is one in a series of three works that were made motivated by a desire to understand what has been, arguably, the most significant event in Irish history since independence in 1922: the loss of sovereignty. This work is rooted heavily in the etymology of ‘silhouette’, a word that referred to a form of portraiture which flourished in the 1700s. This form of portrait making took its

name from Etienne de Silhouette, France’s Controller-General of Finances during the seven-year war with Britain and Prussia. After his appointment in 1759 Silhouette oversaw a period of severe austerity, and subsequently his surname became used satirically by the French people to describe anything considered cheap.

Tim Durham is a Killucan based photographic artist.

After the Fact is the collective name for three artistic responses to the collapse of the Irish property boom by Westmeath artist Tim Durham, and the National Gallery recently purchased Durham’s work for the National Collection.

Space

Annemarie Ni Churreáin
on writing at the Good
Hatchery Studios

“What makes a space suitable for the work of a writer or artist? I was thinking about this as I made my way to the Good Hatchery Studios to spend some time there working on new poems. It was January and a snowy mist had settled over the Irish midlands. Offaly seemed haunted by a dream.

Schools are designed for learning, churches are designed for prayer, so too must spaces for creative people be fit for purpose, though I can speak only for myself when suggesting what type of space works well. I can speak only from my own interests. I like old things. I wear second-hand clothes. I surround myself with aged woods and salvaged objects. In all aspects of my life, I have a compulsion towards the past and towards spaces that resonate of other lives.

I arrived at The Good Hatchery and knew instinctively that I could write there. I wandered through the courtyard and felt a strange synergy with the creatures – the hens, the stray cats, a cluster of mice behind a turf-stack. I noticed, beneath a ruined sill, that a handful of violets had survived the recent frost. In the main workspace upstairs, there were two large rooms heated by turf fires. At one window was a battered velvet chair and at another a hammock was slung from the rafters. I would be lighting fires, composting food and learning to live discreetly in the bog.

I was raised in Donegal and have a particular fondness for the bog. It holds for me the same kind of loneliness that occurs in my poems. It represents bleakness, mystery and treasure. I remember, as a child, calling my own name out across the houseless bog-hills and waiting for the echo to return. I remember the wait. Perhaps, I had come to Offaly with the aim of

recreating that moment of expectancy. Perhaps I had come to hear myself again.

In my writing I am concerned with landscape, loss and the process of reunion and renewal. I am especially interested in trees (as symbols of language). On that first visit, I climbed a gate into a local field and found an ancient tree standing alone against the deep mist-tinted sky. I stood beneath the leafless branches and had the feeling of being in the presence of roots, of ghosts, of energy. In the shade of that tree, was a space where I knew I could write new poems.”

Annemarie Ni Churreáin is a widely published poet. In 2011 she graduated from The Oscar Wilde Centre, Trinity College Dublin with an M.Phil in Creative Writing and most recently she has been a 2014 Literature Fellow at Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart/Germany.

<http://www.thegoodhatchery.com/>



Mullingar Student Players in rehearsals for *Cats*! : Top Rachel Thompson, bottom Rachel O'Dowd.

MULLINGAR Student Players

Hot on the heels of the successful *Les Misérables*, Mullingar Student Players are taking on *CATS*! for their 2015 production.

In 2003, a group of youngsters from the Mullingar area came together as the Mullingar Student Players. Fast forward 11 years and for 2015 Student Players will take on *CATS*! as their Spring production from April 6th-11th. Auditions were held for the feline cast and rehearsals have been going steadily since early 2015. A Tony Award-winner for Best Musical, this song-and-dance spectacular is also one of the longest-running musicals in Broadway history. Enchanting music from musical director Niamh O'Shea (including the immortal 'Memory') and fantastic choreography from Aimee McManus will make this a perfect show for lovers of man's second-best friend.

For more information on the Mullingar Student Players and their upcoming productions visit www.mullingarartscentre.ie

ARTS encounters...

treading softly while shouting from the roof tops...

Throughout 2014 arts encounters were happening all around County Westmeath as a result of grant aid provided in the form of arts grants.

In corners, highways and byways of the county, groups were coming together while artists and the wider public were engaging and participating in a variety of innovative projects. The modest but crucially important annual arts grants allow for development of the artists and their work, meaningful engagement with community and voluntary groups, funding for materials and equipment and collaboration between organisations/projects and artists.

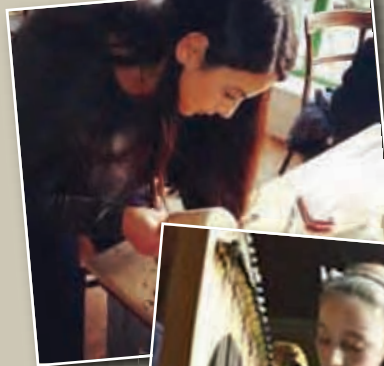
Herewith we provide a snapshot of real 'live' examples of the grants-in-action and acknowledge some of the highlights since our last edition: These included Rose Finerty and Louise Shanagher producing a wonderful children's meditation book called 'It's always there' which are currently on their second print run. Gateway Youth Project used

their grant for the development of a DJ workshop and Positive Mental Health Summer programme. The young people learned how to DJ, mix, scratch and cue with serato scratch live. Liz Johnson secured mentorship from Curator Aisling Prior to assist in the presentation of her work for competitions and commissions, and Paul Roy (soon to exhibit in Luan Gallery) was able to fund his membership of Leinster Printmaking. Fiona Kelly used her bursary for her Cork Printmakers Membership Fee, while Eamon Reilly purchased materials to create art as well as enhancing his website. Artist Olive Whelan gathered stories from families in Irish Autism Action and Olive also facilitated an Arts in Health programme for TEAM Mullingar. Annie and Peter Morton bought materials to assist in their art and photography practices while the Umbrella Studio offered art

lessons to children who might not otherwise be able to attend art classes, both materials and artist's fees were covered. Artist Ursula Meehan was supported to develop a body of work as well as covering some framing and printing costs. David Gorman purchased additional wood carving tools, and worked with students to produce a wood carving Jungle book. The Mullingar Harp School offered a workshop to new and existing students to create music of their own, while the arts grant to St Colmcille's National School enabled them to engage artist Emma Noonan to guide in the art project for their GP room.

The above is a brief snapshot of activity taking place around County Westmeath and the arts office looks forward to a vibrant and colourful 2015 as more exciting projects take flight.

A participant of Dave Gorman's Wood Working Workshop in the Grocery, Tyrellspass



Student of Mullingar Harp School

You're Ugly Too

There were international eyes on Offaly in February when Irish film *You're Ugly Too* had its world premiere at the prestigious Berlin International Film Festival, under the Generation section. The film was funded by the Irish Film Board and was shot in Offaly and Dublin in early 2014. Written and directed by Mark Noonan, *You're Ugly Too* is his debut feature film. Originally from Birr in Offaly, Noonan is now based in Dublin.

The film stars Aidan Gillen (*Game of Thrones*, *the Wire* and *Charlie*) as Will, who is released from prison on compassionate leave to care for his niece Stacey (Lauran Kinsella; *Albert Nobbs*), after

the death of her mother. As they both head into the sleepy Irish midlands and attempt to be a family, they suffer a series of setbacks; Stacey is refused admission to the local school because of her recently developed narcolepsy; Will repeatedly comes close to breaking his prison-ordered curfew; and his attempts at being a father figure to her prove disastrous.

You're Ugly Too was produced by John Keville and Conor Barry for Savage Productions

You're Ugly Too' Cast and Director (from left) Erika Sainte, Lauren Kinsella, Aidan Gillen, George Pistereanu, with director Mark Noonan photographed Feb 7 at The Hollywood Reporter / Glashütte Original Lounge in Berlin.





Heart of Ireland

As Mullingar gears up for an ambitious new festival, organiser Melaine Lynch talks about its uniqueness and gives her vision for what people can expect to see over the weekend

The Heart of Ireland Festival is a new international arts festival for the Irish Midlands, programmed to take place in Mullingar on the 11th & 12th of July 2015.

Though still in the challenging developmental stages as a new-festival-on-the block, the organisers have a clear two strand framework in mind. Here Melaine describes what the festival will be all about:

1. The Heart of Ireland competition.

Our idea is to connect with the Irish diaspora with the aim of putting the Midlands on the Irish tourist map. The competition is the search for the Heart of Gold, not a saint but a strong character who possesses a gift for storytelling, a love for life and a generosity of spirit. Entry will be open to men and women, 50+ years, living in Ireland or a member of the Irish diaspora. At 'Heart' centres, nominations will take

place, and then in Mullingar during the Heart of Ireland Festival and after an interview process, the Heart of Gold will be selected.

2. An arts festival like no other.

The Arts Festival is a 100 year timeline from one end of the town to the other; a window back in time, capturing the Ireland passed on to our diaspora by their ancestors. Starting with the 1920s bedecked in the style of a vintage country fair with traditional Irish music, street theatre and storytelling sessions you travel through time and genres to jazz bands and our open-air cinema, screening black and white movies. Next up it's the rock 'n' roll movement of 60's, followed by 80's pop and on to today where the 21st century is in full swing. Our insight: the concentration and flavour of 'Irishness' depends on when their emigrant ancestors left our shores.

We welcome artists of all disciplines to get in contact,

and propose ideas on how you would like to get involved in the festival. We are looking for ideas that challenge Irish stereotypes and themes might include the diaspora, inter-generational storytelling and mythology. This is an opportunity to create an authentic Irish experience.

It's time to journey back in time to our infamous storytelling heritage and reawaken the values that forged the Irish spirit. Forget celebrity culture. This is the Real Ireland, in all its gritty glory. It's the Ireland we nearly lost during the Celtic Tiger; the Ireland where community spirit sets the beat of life.

If you are interested in getting involved, please email hi@heartofireland.ie or you can follow the action on our facebook page (facebook.com/heartofirelandfestival) and on Twitter @hi_ireland.



STRING THEORY!

Music Generation Offaly Westmeath is now reaching over 4,000 students per week across the two counties!

Participating numbers increased when the first phase of their instrument bank was completed last September in collaboration with Mullingar Employment Action Group, and supported by Westmeath Community Development under the Rural Development (LEADER) Programme 2007 – 2013. As a result of this investment over 550 instruments, a mix of guitars, keyboards, drum kits, string, woodwind and brass instruments are now available to young people taking part in MGOW programmes who are resident in rural Westmeath.

This new instrument bank has meant the development of an innovative large group string tuition programme. Following a successful pilot in Loughgar NS, Co. Westmeath (pictured) there are now 30 young violinists in the string programme being taught by Natalie Flynn. This will extend into its second participating school, St. Joseph's National School, Milltownpass over the spring, along with many new opportunities for new instrumental tuition for children.

For more information on Music Generation Offaly Westmeath please see www.offaly.ie/musicgeneration or follow on Facebook

Mullingar man doesn't know what to be at

by Conor English

Or does he? For any student finishing a creative third level degree, leaving their realm of purely artistic driven projects can be daunting enough. It seems as if they are faced with a choice between two options.

On the one hand "I can sell my soul to the devil" and get a job with a local printer or go rent a shed somewhere and completely indulge my artistic expression. It seems that it is a question of priorities, do I want to make some money for a new car, designing logos for the local chipper or do I want to immerse myself in a personal project that only a handful of people in the room will understand (but that's okay, they are the only ones I want to impress anyway).

Maybe it's about finding a balance between both, doing a bit, here and there, for some spare change. Whilst at the same time working in my shed, developing my own 'purely artistic' and conceptual projects. The sort that gives me hope that I might get spotted for doing something good... and out of the norm by someone with influence and connections... like someone who lives in Hollywood and has a big house, maybe.

When I left the door of the college with a degree in Visual Communications, I

never felt confined to only doing graphic design work. Working Creatively in everything I do is something I truly believe in and this comes from the strong ethos of college learning. It is exciting to delve into areas that are unknown and one can often produce great work when not bound by professional restrictions, some naivety goes a long way I think, it hasn't harmed me so far!

Along with a fellow graduate, Calvin Doyle, I am taking my first steps into Film making with the production of a short film. The story of a psychic, who tells tales of other people's fortunes and knows so little of her own, all set and filmed in the Midlands. Our goal is too really capture the atmosphere of present day Ireland in the Midlands and to present a thought provoking short film ready for film festivals around the country.

So go on, for me the choice is easy.

Have some balls and make some art man!

SHARON MURPHY **ARTIST IN RESIDENCE ARTHOUSE**

Sharon Murphy is delighted to have won first prize – a month long residency at Arthouse Studio Stradbally - at the 2014 Annual Open Art Exhibition Dunmase Arts Centre - for two of her photographic works from her series *Intervals*.

She looks forward to working collaboratively to initiate a new series of photographic and video works in the Spring. "I welcome the opportunity represented by this residency – the distinctive context of Laois and the Midlands; time; space; access to expertise in the arts and collaborative possibilities - to extend the scope and deepen the understanding and references that inform my practice".

Sharon is a lens-based artist working primarily in photography and video and her work draws on theatre and on wider performance genres. "In much of my work I deliberately employ theatrical language and devices within staged photographic pieces, sometimes on quite a large scale and using both digital and the old fashioned 5 x 4 large-format film. I am interested in exploring the relationship between photography, *mise-en-scene*, and the transformations of self (particularly the young person) that occurs in performance through the alchemy of light, space, and body". The dual focus of her artistic practice and professional interest (the interiority of childhood/ the performative in photography) derives from a career in theatre and the wider arts including TEAM Theatre, The Abbey Theatre and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council Arts Office.

Sharon has shown in a wide range of group exhibitions, most recently at DLR Lexicon Gallery (Dun Laoghaire), The Royal Ulster Academy (Belfast), The Royal Scottish Academy (Edinburgh) and Dimbola Museum and Galleries (Isle of Wight, UK). She was also recently shortlisted for the Inspiration Arts Award for her series *Intervals*.

A central preoccupation of Sharon's work is childhood as a state of being. "I am interested in the felt experience of being young and in particular the transition

from childhood to adolescence. I explore this on a spectrum from the deliberately autobiographical, through the allegorical, to the political". In making her work Sharon engages collaboratively with performers cast from acting schools and youth ensembles. "I also work with professional actors and other theatre artists such as lighting and costume designers and movement directors".

During the residency she would like to research and develop a body of photographic and video work which offers a contemporary take on the genre of portraiture. "I look forward to collaborating with local theatre professionals, young artists and youth ensembles to make a new series of work which explores and celebrates 'transformation through performance' and notions of belonging and identity. Being originally from Carlow I am grateful for and excited by this opportunity and look forward to working closely with the artistic and wider community of Laois".





Open Door Drama Group **The Year of the Hiker**

“**The Year of the Hiker**” is a tragicomic story of unrequited love set in the 1960s. Twenty years after the reprobate “Hiker” Lacey abandoned his wife and three children, he returns on the day of his daughter’s wedding. He is seeking forgiveness and a place to die. His sister-in-law has assumed the father’s role. She and each member of the family react to the homecoming in their individual manner. Tempers flair, regrets are voiced and poignant moments filled with hatred and love are shared. Mixing humour and tragedy, laughter and tears Keane explores these emotions in a truly gripping and utterly credible tale.

CAST

Michelle O’ Sullivan • Roxanne Byrne
Aaron Sheil • Joe Murphy
Paul Kenna • Stasia Kilroy
Kevin Lalor Fitzpatrick

BACKSTAGE CREW

David Corri • Eamonn Delaney
PJ Mulhall • John Kavanagh

Sat 16th May

Birr Theatre & Arts Centre
057 91 22911
www.birrtheatre.com

Fri&Sat 22nd&23rd May

Portlaoise Dunamais Arts Centre
057 8663355
www.dunamais.ie

ECHOES of ABSENCE

Architectural interiors, mundane exteriors and subdued landscapes referencing cinematography are common themes in artist David Fox’s work.

Influenced by directors such as Stanley Kubrick and Steve Mc Queen and the cropped symmetrical interior compositions they construct, along with an absence of human presence, the paintings create an atmosphere of suspension and a sense of eeriness.

Fox has just completed his first major international solo exhibition in Galleria Silvestre, Tarragona, in Spain and was recently curated for a group exhibition in the Luan Gallery, Athlone called ‘Lonely Planet’.

So are there ‘echoes of absence’ in his move from Tullamore to Belfast in 2011? “It felt like a bold decision to move to Belfast city” says Fox, “I had been accepted for a Masters at the University of Ulster and four years later I am now based at Creative Exchange Artist Studio, East Belfast”

“For a relatively small city, Belfast has a thriving art scene and a variety of contemporary art galleries and studios, there is a ‘late night art’ event where galleries open their doors late so there’s a great buzz for contemporary art here in Belfast and I suppose I wanted to be part of it. Creative Exchange has been a great platform for me at this stage of my career. The board of directors have offered me critical advice, encouragement and given me confidence in my practice, also helping to expose my work to a wider audience.”

As much as he is enjoying his new base, Fox is a frequent traveller, “Recently I have been to MOMA in New York, and major galleries in Chicago, Berlin and Hong Kong and most recently visiting the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona. While in Hong Kong, I was quite taken by a Jeff Koons exhibition at Gagosian Gallery. Koons’s conceptually motivated work and his life sized pop culture sculptures have inspired new ways of

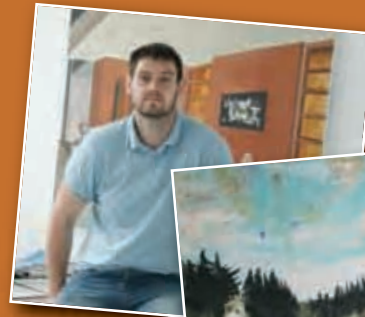
thinking, also influencing my idea of painting gallery interiors.

“For me it is important to see these works up close and study the various ways in which artists work. After viewing a Peter Doig show at the Michael Werner Gallery in London, I’ve found my paint application and draughtsmanship has transformed into a looser more carefree approach. I take every opportunity to absorb contemporary arts practice and to view artworks in the flesh, is truly inspiring.”

Fox is currently working on new work for an exhibition at Queen Street Studios in Belfast in April and towards a future show in Madrid.

Follow on Instagram: @davidfoxartist

www.artistdavidfox.com



David Fox -
The Log Cabin
oil on canvas



Making Grace

Collette Sheerin is a singer/songwriter, traditional and classical flute player who has been recently compared to Michelle Shocked and Marianne Faithfull. Born and raised in Offaly and now based in Sligo town, she has firmly established herself as a part of the spirited and diverse music scene there.

Collette, whose music is described as mellow, organic folk rock/pop, has recently recorded and successfully launched her second solo album entitled "Making Grace", a collection of ten original songs which scored an impressive 8/10 by Hot Press Magazine and was described as "On the gently shuffling 'The Wicked', Sheerin's voice recalls 80's US folk maverick, Michelle Shocked, while on the country-ish 'Pure Gold' she comes across like a younger Marianne Faithfull with a touch of Iris Dement's down-home delivery. Her voice shines on the gorgeous piano grounded ballad 'Love is Blind', which features stellar backing harmonies and rhythm section." – COLM O'HARE

Performing regularly both as a solo artist and with her band 'The Candles' an original folk/rock/trad outfit featuring Anna Houston and Shane McGowan, Collette is a member of trad/rock group 'and is a regular collaborator with world music maestros' in



2010 'No Crows' recorded one of her own compositions *Marianne's Demise* for their third album a piece which gone on to receive extensive radio play at home and abroad and in August 2014 she was invited to join them on the Italian leg of their European tour.

Collette has enjoyed a colourful music career in many pockets around the world. In November 2013 she performed for the vice president of Uganda while on voluntary work there (she's also an avid gardener) and in 2006, while studying in Alaska she was invited to join the gentlemen of Anchorage based band for a few gigs. While in Perth she joined celtic rockers for a series of performances there.

Collette is currently touring with her new album *Making Grace* which is also available on iTunes. www.collettesheerin.com; Follow Collette on Facebook & Twitter – Collette Sheerin Music.



An exciting new season in store at Abbey Road Artists' Studios

Since opening in 2011 Abbey Road Artists' Studios has been housing resident artists, groups, courses, workshops and talks, but the 2015 season sees a new and exciting schedule of events.

Recently launched The Abbey Road Community Artist Residency Scheme has just had a new artist assigned to the studios and in the coming months this scheme will partner with local community groups to participate in workshops and other activities.

There are currently four resident artists using the facilities, one being a part of the aforementioned community scheme. The artists have 24-hour access to their studio, wi-fi internet and free parking. Moreover, the artists receive administrative and marketing support in areas such as proposal writing and funding applications from the Athlone Arts and Tourism team. Studio artists also enjoy discounted rates for workshops, lectures, talks and events run by Athlone Arts and Tourism Ltd.

Past artists at Abbey Road Artists' Studios include established artists such as Lesley Wingfield, Catherine Rock, Ann McGuinness, Geraldine Kretsch, Lawrence O'Neill, Margo McNulty, Lucy Kelly Desmond, Carol Kelly, Paul Timoney and Rose Finerty who each work in a variety of media including, printmaking, painting, embroidery and performance.

The upstairs Studio 5 is offered to various local groups and clubs and can be used for exhibitions, meetings, talks, readings, discussions, lectures, presentations and functions. Past groups using the space include Athlone Arts Group, Textile Club, Making Space, Midlands Photography Club, Luan Tunes, AIT and Architect Republic.

The Abbey Road Artists' Studios Open Day returns on Culture Night September 18th when studios open their doors to the curious.

BEALTAINÉ FESTIVAL 2015 IN LAOIS

County Laois once again celebrates creativity in older age with the annual May-time Bealtaine Festival. Entitled, *Celebrating Creativity as We Age* the Bealtaine festival is co-ordinated by the Laois Arts Office, and a comprehensive programme of events will be published.

Events for 2015 include performances by the Butterfly Theatre Company and the Laois Federation ICA choir for residents and out-patients in Care Hospitals in the county. A performance by Carnation Theatre Group in Portlaoise for the Active Retirement Group, Exhibition and workshops at the Arthouse, Stradbally as well as lots of creative events in Libraries and community venues around the county.

Storyteller and Folklore collector Nuala Hayes will host a number of events in the libraries in May. Entitled, "Sharing local stories", the exchange of local folklore and stories will take place in the following Libraries. All are welcome.

Thursday 14th May, Mountrath Library 7.00pm
Tuesday 19th May, Mountmellick Library 7.00pm



Dunamais Arts Centre celebrates Bealtaine with a number of musical highlights! Winners of Best Trad Group of the Year *Goitse* will begin the month with a fundraiser for Laois Comhaltas, who host the Laois County Fleadh later in May. *The Illegals* make a welcome return with their popular nostalgic classics. Laois Open Door present the JB Keane favourite, *The Year of The Hiker*. Dunamais's weekly *Over 50's Dance Classes* offers a free class for Bealtaine so try it out! Check www.dunamais.ie for full Bealtaine listings including details of specially selected film screenings.

The theme for 2015 comes from a famous homecoming, where Odysseus comes home but does not recognise his homeland: "Tell me, then, and tell me truly, what land and country is this". Last May, an estimated 119,426 people took part in Bealtaine events in communities throughout Ireland. You can find out all you need to know about Bealtaine 2015 from the festival website www.bealtaine.com or locally on www.laois.ie.

If you wish to have your event listed please contact the Arts Office on 057 8664033/13 or email artsoff@laoiscoco.ie.

More Lives Than One Dean Crowe Theatre

Like many venues now used for the arts the Dean Crowe Theatre did not start life as a theatre. It was the church for St. Peter's parish.

The old church appears to have been built in two phases, the first as early as 1795 when it would have been no more than a small chapel. It was then enlarged in 1809 and served as the parish church until the completion of SS Peter & Paul in 1937.

The novelist John Broderick in describing the church wrote "The inside of this old building was most unusual; and in many ways pre-dated today's idea of gathering a congregation close about an altar". The seats were arranged in three sections, in front and at both sides of the altar; and over these were the galleries. They were known as The Organ Gallery, The Old Men's Gallery and The Grand Gallery. The young John McCormack sang in this church in the 1890s, under the direction of the Choirmaster Michael Kilkelly.

When the new church of SS Peter & Paul was built the building became a parochial hall for St. Peter's Parish. It was a favourite venue for dancing and other forms of entertainment. In 1959 it was renovated and re-named The Dean Crowe Memorial Hall and soon became a venue for a multitude of local and national events, ranging from the annual production of Athlone Musical Society to The All-Ireland Drama Festival.

John B. Keane first came to prominence through the Dean Crowe when the Listowel Drama Group won the All Ireland Drama Festival in 1959 for their production of 'Sive'.

In 1992 a decision was taken to refurbish and extend the old Hall to create a modern theatre.



Our Lady's Bower school performing at the Dean Crowe Theatre



Later the Bishop of Elphin agreed to extend a 99 year lease to the newly formed Dean Crowe Theatre Trust and thus the operation became possible.

As the history of the Dean Crowe Theatre shows an arts venue can have many more lives than one and those of us who have the rare honour of working as core staff of the venue or the unique privilege of serving the venue as a board member can only endeavour to be good custodians for the lives that are yet to come.

(Image Courtesy of Gerard Hanberry who read from his biography of the Wilde family in May 2014)

People's Choice Award at Foundation 14,
Helen McMahon's Polychromatic Shadow Configuration Device

IMMA in Tullamore

Tullamore town will choose its favourite masterpieces from the collection of The Irish Museum of Modern Art in what will be the first time an Irish town has curated its own exhibition online.

Foundation15 Art Festival, Tullamore's contemporary arts event, has announced this unique collaboration with IMMA as just part of this year's programme, which will take place from Sept 10th to 25th in various venues and empty spaces around the town.

Up to 10 works of art from the museum's national collection will be curated by the people of Tullamore on what will effectively be an online voting poll. It is the first time that IMMA have worked this way also, having recently made their collection available online. With over 3,500 items in the collection, curator Brendan Fox will select just 40 pieces from which the public will then choose 10.

"We are really excited about this unique curatorial process, engaging with the public is what F15 is all about, but it means that we could be bringing work from not only major Irish artists such as Dorothy Cross, Willie Doherty, or Louis le Broquay to Tullamore, but also international names such as Marina Abramovic, Philippe Parreno or Hans Richter," says Brendan Fox. "Foundation15 is about more than just paving the way for Tullamore Community Arts Centre, which we know will be the catalyst for further exciting creative interactions in the town, it is about considering the midlands as a international contemporary arts platform our job is to get the public excited about both of these possibilities."

Foundation 15 is much more than an exhibition trail with a programme of educational workshops, talks, theatre and music events all forming part of the two week festival. Last year, King Kong Company was one of the most talked about gigs in the town while the People's Choice Award exhibit proved the most photographed artwork of the event. For more information on the programme see www.foundationartsfestival.com or follow on Facebook.



Paul Moore Q&A

Tullamore native Paul Moore is an accountant by day and a photographer the remainder of the time. Recently his work has been featured in an exhibition in Miami and in National Geographic magazine..

When did you first start taking photos?

I started taking photos, seriously, when I got my first iPhone about 5 years ago. Initially I presumed that a camera on a phone would be next to useless but when photo editing apps started appearing on the App Store I realised that by working on the images with these new apps I could create interesting images. When I started off I used to rely too much on these apps. I was more concerned with editing or apping the photos than I was with actually taking good photos. Over time I realised that no amount of apping could turn a bad photo into a good one. I then concentrated on developing my eye by taking thousands of photos. The limitations on an iPhone camera mean that you have to be very aware of the available light and you have to get in close to your subject to get clear shots. I got my first DSLR last year and everything I had learned regarding light and composition from using the iPhone really stood to me.

Do you prefer people or places as subjects?

When I started off I preferred taking landscapes. The main reason being I was dealing with static subjects and I was able to spend more time composing a shot. While I still like to shoot landscapes and show off my local area I now prefer photographing people and buildings. I have recently started to concentrate on finding old and forgotten buildings around the Midlands to try and raise awareness of their existence. Over the course of the year I hope to build up a portfolio of these buildings. I also love photographing concerts and live music events and doing photoshoots with musicians. I hope to be able to do more of this during the year. Of course my favourite subjects are my wife and three children. Having an interest in photography means that I am able to capture all those little moments that life has to offer.

What was your first camera?

My first camera was a phone which is as ridiculous as it sounds. Over the last five years I have used a variety of iPhones and I currently use the iPhone 5s. I also have a Canon 700D DSLR. I use both of these cameras when I am out and about as they both have their own advantages.

Has modern technology made it easier for photographers?

Technology has definitely made it easier. One of the huge advantages that digital photography has over traditional film photography is the fact that you can literally take thousands of photos. This can be a great help to anyone starting out as the more shots you take the better you will become. There is a saying in photographic circles the first 10,000 photos you take will be your worst. And the advantage of digital photography means that you can delete them all and no one ever has to see them. In the film days you were limited to 24 or 36 shots per roll of film so you had to be more selective of what you shot. Now you can just keep shooting until your memory card is full, delete the whole lot and start all over again. Another advantage that modern camera have over their film counterparts is that they all have screens on the back so that you can review your shots as you go and make adjustment to your settings if you are not happy with the results. Back in days of yore you had to send your roll of film to be developed and it would be weeks before you saw the results.

The technology does not end with the camera. There are now very advanced photo editing suites available. Photoshop and Lightroom from Adobe would be the most famous. The only limits on what can be achieved by this editing is your imagination but the one thing to bear in mind is that it is easier to work on a well taken photo than one that is badly composed and out of focus.

Finally social media and photo sharing websites have made it very easy for people to share their photos with the world. By using Facebook and Flickr I have been able to raise my profile to the extent that I have been interviewed by local, national and international publications about photography. I have had my photos shown in exhibitions from California to New Zealand and quite a number of places in between. Last year I was signed up by a stock photo company called Arcangel Images who are based between New York, Paris, London and Malaga. I was also invited to write articles for the iPhone Photography School website and the Lions Club Tullamore annual. None of this would

have happened without the exposure that I got on social media.

What is your background?

I grew up in Tullamore. My father is a very well known music teacher and musician. As a result I was surrounded by the arts as I grew up. My father is also an excellent photographer and that is where my interest came from. I studied business studies in college and currently work as an accountant and financial advisor. I always had an interest in the arts, particularly music and cinema but never had an outlet for it until I discovered photography. While I feel I have made some progress as a photographer over the last 5 years I am still only starting out and I have an incredible amount to learn.

What awards have you won recently?

I was included in the following

- iPhoneography Centrals Best Photos of 2014
- iPhone Photography Schools Best Photos of 2014
- The AppWhisperers Best Photos of 2014

I won a couple of Best of Year 2014 awards from Pixoto.com

I am currently part of exhibition in Miami showcasing the work of 40 iPhone Photographers from around the world.

Favourite locations/events photographed so far?

We are very lucky here in Ireland to be surrounded by natural beauty. My favourite locations so far have been Lough Boora Parklands, Charleville Castle and surroundings, the Slieve Blooms and West Clare.

Tips for iPhone photographers?

As I said above I am still learning myself and I have a long way but if I was to give advice it would be to take as many photos of as many subjects as possible. You will learn from your mistakes and there will be lots of mistakes. Also staying away from apps as much as possible when you are starting off. Concentrate on getting good photos. I learned this the hard way.

MidlandsArts andCultureMagazine

A REVIEW OF THE ARTS IN LAOIS, LONGFORD, OFFALY AND WESTMEATH



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