

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
VISUAL ARTS

FREE

MidlandsArts andCultureMagazine

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NATIONAL DRAWING DAY IN LAOIS

National Drawing Day is a national event celebrating drawing in all its forms and media. Laois Arthouse, in conjunction with studio resident Saidhbhín Gibson, will host a workshop to encourage you to try out drawing.

Join us for a fun workshop where you will learn about drawing on **Saturday 20 May from 11am to 1pm at Laois Arthouse, Stradbally, Co Laois.** Suitable for all ages, adults and children, and no experience is necessary. Advance booking is required, please contact the Arts Office on 057 866 4033/13 to book a place. Age 6 years to adults and children under 10 must be accompanied by an adult.

Saidhbhín Gibson recently completed a MFA in Sculpture at NCAD, Dublin. She employs a range of techniques in her practice including drawing, printmaking and needlepoint lace and uses various fabrication methods in her sculptural works.



A Word from the Editor

Building creative communities is the ambition of the Creative Ireland Programme, a five year initiative which will run from 2017 to 2022.

The programme follows in the wake of the very successful Centenary commemorations which saw a wide range of arts, culture and heritage initiatives across the country.

In the midlands there was an impressive selection of events in counties Laois, Offaly, Westmeath and Longford and it is to be hoped that this will be the case with the Creative Ireland Programme. A network of highly experienced arts officers, heritage officers and librarians has been set up across all 31 local authorities to lead on each county's Creative Ireland Programme.

Over the next few weeks there will be a series of public meetings across the midlands to share ideas, develop collaborations and explore opportunities for increased investment in local arts, culture and creative industries.

Additional funding to support the initiative will be made available through the Creative Ireland Programme in 2017 with the potential for further investment over the next four years. Full details of the Creative Ireland Programme are available at creativeireland.ie or check with the arts office in your county.

Vivienne Clarke of Acumen Media,
Editor

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POEMS from the SCHOOL ROOM

by Eileen Casey

It was with great pleasure I facilitated a number of poetry workshops in Birr primary schools last November. Initially, the idea was to commemorate 1916 through its poetic legacy. After all, the historical events of 1916 were initiated by poets such as Pearse, McDonagh and Plunkett who believed in the power of poetry to spark change.

Going further back, Romantic Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) claimed that poets were the natural 'legislators of the world.' Heady stuff for sure.

Words like 'politics' and 'history' weigh heavy when facing a room filled with bright young folk. It seemed not entirely fitting to bring these children back through the winding labyrinth of revolutionary events, especially when it was clearly obvious how grounded in the present they were. Then it occurred to me that a political poem or indeed a historical one, can be born from the simplest act. John McGahern once said that "a woman combing her hair or a man eating an egg were every bit as important for writing as big, significant events." When I asked the children to remain in their present timeframe and write out of these moments in their lives, so recently lived (moments such as travelling to school, getting up earlier, making breakfast etc.), I knew that they would lay down histories which future generations could read and learn from.

Powder

This November morning, when I awoke in my bed
I glanced across the room to see a little sleepy head;
her hair as brown as cocoa powder
her face as pale as baby powder.

The smell of the fresh morning filled the air.
I watched as my mother washed her hair
And I listened as her singing filled the air,
along with my father talking
about his mare.
(Megan Ward, sixth class, Mercy Primary)

When I first read Megan Ward's poem, I was filled with admiration. Wonderful imagery marks the poem out as memorable ('hair brown as cocoa powder' is utterly unforgettable). This poem is political in that male and female lines are clearly drawn. Mother is associated with action (washing little sleepy head's hair) while father is connected to speech when he talks about 'his mare'. Taking it further, the poem could be said to make distinctions between word and deed. *Powder*, in many ways harks back to Victorian poetry, when the mother (the 'Angel' of the house) knew her clearly marked boundaries which was the domestic sphere. In *Powder*, however, while the mother is engaged with domestic acts, there is an overwhelming leaning towards 'art' and the making of it, the mother's 'singing filled the air,' which suggests that her 'song' is lyrical and poetic.

What was amazing to me, as a grandmother in my sixth decade, was that the children before me (in both primary schools) were the grandchildren of men and women I had played with as a child myself. Born in High Street, Birr (a stone's throw from St Brendan's Primary School), I was familiar with names such as Grainger, Carroll, Gallagher, McCarthy, Riley, among others. These names were a litany of remembered friendships and my own school days became like a tableau vivant, relived in classrooms scented with chalk and lit by smiles. This

sense of camaraderie was captured so eloquently by Lorraine McCarthy in her poem,

Awakening

As I woke on this bitter, cold, frosty winter morning,
I saw a thin layer of white ice covering my roof –
all from my bedroom window.

When I walked slowly across the slippery
road to my granny's house,
the smell of scented shampoo and body spray
wafted in the air. I walked into the kitchen,
the smell of tea filling my senses.

I then made my way to school with my best friend
by my side,
cheeks red as tomatoes
skin white as snow
telling me jokes,
making me laugh.

Our voices filled the cold air
with warm breath
ready to start the day.
(By Lorraine McCarthy)

In Lorraine McCarthy's poem *Awakening*, she makes the journey across the 'slippery road' to her granny's house. Again, like most of the poems written during the workshops, sensual imagery abounds; 'the smell of scented shampoo and body spray,' and 'tea filling my senses.' What I felt was noteworthy about *Awakening* is the reference to 'cheeks red as tomatoes' and 'skin white as snow'. The filtering in of fairy tale reference makes a solid claim for the influence of reading and how the familiar stories of childhood (*Snow White*, for example) often act as scaffolding for story telling. The closing tercet in *Awakening*, is a beautiful evocation of 'voice' and how it's breathed into, rather like an engine, to begin the mechanics of the day. What's totally gorgeous about reading poems from this age group is the revelation of how innate wisdoms emerge. I thought of philosopher Descartes' 'ghost in the machine' when I read those last three lines of *Awakening*. A philosophical statement from one so young is nothing short of awesome. McCarthy's poem reminded me also of Victorian poet Christina Rossetti (1830 -1894). In her poem 'Goblin Market' there is an all pervading sense of sisterhood and the loyalties and friendship which bind; she says 'there is no friend like a sister/in calm or stormy weather;/to cheer one on the tedious way/to fetch one if one goes astray/to lift one if one totters down, to strengthen whilst one stands.'

Kayleigh Corrigan Bennett's poem *Thaw* is an intriguing blend of feeling alive in the moment, naming the universe ('blue, azury sky') yet also being constrained by Pavlov's bell...in this case, the class bell. A curious mix of freedom and containment, signified by spatial references...from the small kitchen window to the robins in the tree. From the car interior to the schoolyard and ultimately the

containment of the school room itself, a reference tempered by the word 'cozy'.

Thaw

I awoke on this frosty November morning.
I could smell eggs and burnt toast. I looked out
the kitchen window. I saw the frosty, crunchy grass,
blue azury sky and the clouds as white as snow.
As I was eating my breakfast I was listening to
the robins in the trees.
At 9.00am it was time to go to school.
I got my fluffy Lionsdale jumper and my scarf.
The car windows were frozen
so my dad got hot water and it started to thaw out.
I arrived at school at 9.05 am
and chatted with my friends Ella G, Shannon and
Becky.
The bell rang so we got all cozy in our class.
(By Kayleigh Corrigan Bennett)

St Brendan's Primary School proved equally fruitful on the morning I visited. In keeping with the Mercy Primary School, I recognised names from childhood. It was pleasing also to see the number of other cultures and nationalities who have made their home here. New, strange sounding surnames add to the familiar. Hubert Zakrzewski's poem, titled simply *November Morning*, is a camera eye cameo of his morning.

November Morning

When I woke up, a thick smell of coffee came upon
my nose.
I stretched and yawned and I put on my clothes.
I looked out the window and saw the blue sky.
I walked down the hallway while putting on my tie.

As I left the house, my mom waved goodbye.
Yet again, I admired the beautiful sky.
The children's laughter was all I could hear.
Three robins were singing like a choir.
Oh I wished I was in front of a cosy warm fire.
(By Hubert Zakrzewski).

Hubert's poem harks to homeland and hearth and is a very telling verbalisation of inner longing. I love his use of 'Three robins were singing like a choir'...the classical three and the universal choir. This poem is quite adult in its theme, that sensation of going towards the day yet also reluctant to fully engage. It's an emotion that's caught between being fully awake and still part of the dream world, as the robins act as intermediaries for the universal choir.

Thanks in abundance to Edel in Administration and Ms Ryan (Mercy Primary) and to Principal Niall Crofton and Mr Daniel Cunningham (St Brendan's Primary) for their warm welcome and total commitment to the project. Space constraints does not permit inclusion of all the poems but special thanks to the boys and girls who entered into the writing of new poems with great good heart, evidenced by the wealth of great poems which emerged.



Lighthouse Studios are the newest addition to Westmeath's lively visual-arts-scape

Artist Clare Kelly has spearheaded a new arts programme which kicked off with an exhibition titled 'Community Art'. The exhibition featured a diverse range of art and artists and launched this Spring at the new Lighthouse Arts Studio in Mullingar Barracks on Ashe Road.

This will be an ongoing exhibition of artwork, literature and music by members of the local community. Classes and workshops will be programmed throughout the year by the Artistic Director Clare Kelly.

These events will assist in providing networking opportunities for both art practitioners and audiences while also encouraging budding poets, musicians and artists to participate in community art.

Edgeworthstown: THE TOWN OF GREAT WRITERS

In 1782, Richard Lovell Edgeworth decided to move his family from his home in England to the family estate in Edgeworthstown, County Longford. This was to begin a long tradition of literary creation in the town.

His daughter Maria Edgeworth went on to have an illustrious career in writing, and produced many works, some of which are still to be found in print today. Her most famous novels were 'Castle Rackrent' and 'The Absentee'. Longford went on to produce many acclaimed writers including Padraic Colum, Vona Groarke, Belinda McKeon, Alan McMonagle and Noel Monahan, to name just a few, and the Edgeworth Literary Society endeavours to maintain the Edgeworth legacy through its annual Festival. The Society continues to promote the work of writers through its annual competitions, and the awarding of the Deirdre Purcell perpetual prize.

It also endeavours to keep alive the legacy of the Edgeworths through its programme of events. 2017 will be no exception with this year's festival from May 5 to 7, 2017 featuring a varied line-up, sure to pique the interest of literary fans of all ages and tastes. This will include children's storytelling, with Heritage in Schools expert Eamon Brennan, while John Beddoes a direct descendant of the Edgeworth Family, will discuss the poetry of Anna Edgeworth. Professor Iggy McGovern, Physicist and Poet, will give a poetry workshop on the Saturday morning and will discuss the link between science and poetry in an evening session. Dr Susan

Manly of St Andrew's University, an authority on 18th century literature and the author of a new biography on Maria Edgeworth, will look at the legacy of Maria Edgeworth.

There will be lots of local talent too, including participation from the local members of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, Corrine McCormack-Bushell, the O'Reilly family and many more.

As part of the heritage trail walk, Octavia Tulloch will give a talk on 'hedgerow' medicine and plants at the Gardens in the Manor, and visitors will be able to visit places of interest on the guided walk, 'St Mary's to St John's and Beyond', with refreshments being served at the rectory.

Arguably the highlight of the weekend will take place when a new portrait of Maria Edgeworth, created by Ballymahon artist Orla Kelleher, is unveiled. Meanwhile, the weekend concludes with a trip to Tullynally Castle, which will include a guided tour of the Castle and Gardens, and a talk by Thomas and Valarie Pakenham.

Details of the festival can be attained from the festival office on 043 6671801 or by visiting www.edgeworthstown.net/festival



30 YEARS, ARTISTS, PLACES

Major Touring Irish Art Exhibition

After an extensive national tour, the final venue to exhibit, 30 Years Artists Places will be the Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise, Co Laois in June 2017 for a month.

This follows an eighteen month national tour which took in venues in counties Clare, Mayo, Waterford, Cork, Tipperary, Limerick, Cavan, Louth, Dublin, Donegal and Laois.

This significant exhibition of art is drawn from county council art collections. These works have been collected over many decades and form a treasure trove of art gathered nationally. Each local authority entered into the spirit of the exhibition and lent the selected art work for the tour. The exhibition marked the 30 years since Local Authorities embarked on providing for the arts locally, featuring 30 artists and 30 places.

This is a must see, not just for the extraordinary line up of Irish artists who rarely find themselves curated into one room, but for the stories of how they each came to be purchased, commissioned or acquired by local authorities, therein lies the real narrative; the quiet, genuine and imaginative support for Irish artists demonstrated by local government for the past 30 years. There is an accompanying souvenir catalogue which gives details on each of the artworks.

The resulting exhibition speaks of places, people and home which reflect upon local authority arts development as just that, of a place and of a people, of rural and urban Ireland, of home in a changing island where we are bold with new ideas but rooted in our past.

This touring exhibition, which was funded by the Arts Council, is the first real public telling of this story. There will be a special event arranged to mark the closing of this exhibition.

30 YEARS, ARTISTS, PLACES

has been curated by Muireann Ní Chonaill, Laois Arts Officer.
See www.localartsireland.ie
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TULLAMORE Club Sessions

It was in September 2014 that the 'Tullamore Club Sessions' came into being. The 'sessions', of which there are roughly four in a year, aim to bring the best of traditional Irish music to Tullamore and to the appreciative audiences who have been supporting the club.

The club was the brainchild of a number of music enthusiasts living in Tullamore and has been built upon by their energy and passion and by the success of each event that has been held thus far. It is in part inspired by 'Mrs. Flannery's Folk Club' which existed in the town in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Tullamore had a thriving folk music scene at that time and the current club in some ways harks back to that era. The 'sessions' also take place in the Tullamore Rugby Club which was the home of 'Mrs. Flannery's Folk Club' for a period in its early days.

Tullamore Rugby Club is an ideal venue for the 'sessions'. The Club accommodates up to 200 people and a number of events have been sold out to date. Even when filled to capacity each member of the audience is but a few metres away from the performers. This close proximity and the atmosphere created by candlelight have rendered the 'sessions' to be a truly intimate experience not only for the audiences but for musicians also. It has been commented upon by many of those performing at the club that the environment is one

in which they are very happy to display their talents. Performers are particularly appreciative of the attentiveness of the audiences. This is an integral aspect of the club, that the musician should be given a space in which they are heard. The music is very much to the fore.

The format for almost every 'session' has been the same. On the chosen Friday night doors will be opened at 19:30 and the music will begin at 20:00. Up and coming younger musicians, who carry the tradition with them, have been given the opening slot on most occasions. This usually last for 40 minutes and has often proved to be as equally accomplished an act as the main one. Younger musicians from all parts of the country have been invited to perform and the club feels that it is extremely important that they should be given a platform to do so. Audience members have continuously commented on the enjoyment they have garnered from these opening acts.

After this the main act will perform for the remainder of the evening. These acts have been truly

outstanding. Technical mastery of their instruments coupled with an in-depth knowledge and a passion for performance have been the features common to all those who have been invited to play at the club. Acts to date have included Martin Hayes, Noel Hill, Frankie Gavin, Liam O'Flynn and many, many more. It is not only instrumental music that has been brought to the stage but also traditional singing. Singing group 'The Voice Squad' were hosted as was singer/musician Séamus Begley.

The Club hopes to continue in this vein of bringing the very best of traditional Irish music to the midlands and in putting Tullamore on the map for having a top quality performance space for traditional musicians. News of upcoming concerts can be found on the 'Tullamore Club Sessions' Facebook page and also in advertisements published in the run up to each event. 'Sessions' are very reasonably priced and are held purely to satisfy the needs of the music-hungry and attentive midlands audiences. Tullamore Club Sessions is supported by Offaly County Council's Arts Office.



Celebrating Longford's creative talents

It was a dark, cold evening outside, but inside Longford Library on November 9 last, there was a very warm atmosphere, as creative talents from across the county gathered together for a night of appreciation.

As County Librarian Mary Carleton Reynolds astutely pointed out: "I can feel the creativity literally bouncing off the walls." A project of Longford Writers Group and Longford County Library, the Poetry and Prose night served a dual purpose; to give local writers a chance to share their pieces and to give up-and-coming Longford artists the opportunity to showcase their work. "When you look around in here at some of this beautiful artwork on the walls it would actually lift your spirits at this time of the year and I think it's fantastic to see that all of these artists are from Co. Longford, and we've a lot to be very proud of in Longford," Ms Carleton Reynolds added.

Officially opening the evening, Cathaoirleach of Longford Municipal District, Cllr Padraig Loughrey, said he was honoured to do so, and paid tribute to the talent in the county. "We have a multitude of wonderful talent here in this county that's showcased here tonight," he said. "It's important that we as a community foster and support this talent. Longford Writers Group is doing just that."

Mullingar has earned itself another rising star!

by Kyron Gibney

Born Lars Vincent McKevitt, Lars Vincent is a contemporary Irish folk artist is originally from the hub of new music in Mullingar but now living in Dublin. With two EPs and a recently released debut album under his belt, Lars Vincent has been described as a 'great addition to Irish song' by Shane MacGowan, lead singer of Celtic trad punk band, the Pogues.

A lover of folk music himself, he says that artists such as Morrissey, Damien Dempsey and The Pogues are the type of artists that have inspired and influenced him to start a music career. He is also quoted as being influenced by different great Irish writers like Patrick Kavanagh and Oscar Wilde.

Lars' musical journey has been quite an atypical one after he spent the decade from 1999 serving in the Irish Defence Forces before discharging in 2010 to pursue his career in music.

His debut EP 'I'm a Man You Don't Meet Everyday' was recorded in Drumlish and was released in May 2012. It received several positive reviews from the likes of GoldenPlec, Hot Press and MRU who described Lars sound as 'passionate, poetic and categorically Irish.' September 2013 saw the release of his second EP named 'Through These Eyes'. This EP had him gain some high profile fans such as Eric Bogle, a folk singer-songwriter from Scotland, and Eddie Furey from the Irish folk band The Fureys.



Writers Dan Flynn, Sally Martin, Eileen Moynihan, Geraldine Ryan, Martina Cooney, Rose Moran, Hilda Kennedy, Rose Byrne, Ann Gerety Smyth and event organiser and MC Maggi McKenna then took turns delivering their poetry and prose; some enchanting, some hilarious – some earth-shattering. The writers delivered their pieces with a unique backdrop of art created by Gerard Keaveney, June Belton, Dan Flynn, Gene Rhatigan, Christine Treacy and Frank McGarry, and in keeping with the 'Longford' theme, Killoe singer-songwriter Sean Rooney provided the perfect soundtrack.

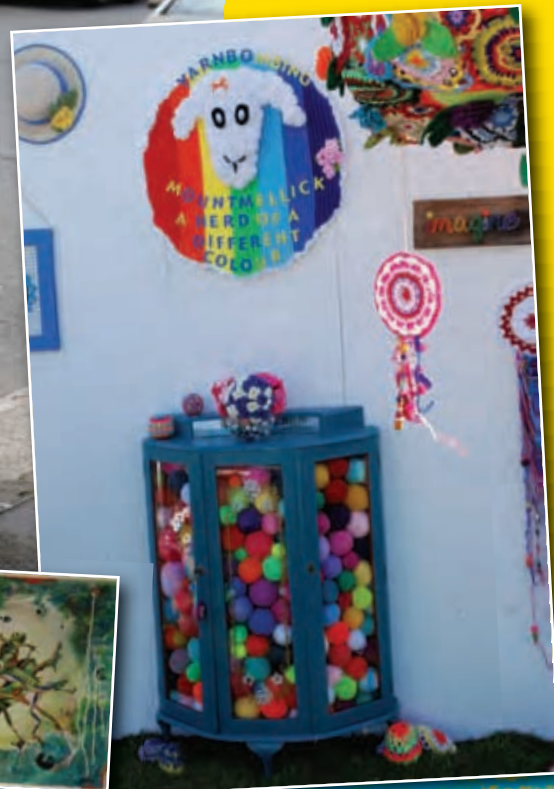
In his speech, Cllr Loughrey expressed his wish that the evening would become a regular event in the county's social calendar, and thanks to the inaugural night's success, this wish appears to be coming true. As we go to print, plans are already afoot for the second such evening, with two singers, Jemma Cowan and Sean O'Neill, lined up, as well as four new artists.



Lars is no stranger to the stage as he has headlined multiple shows in award winning venues in Ireland such as Whelan's Venue, Thomas House and Eamon Doran's in Dublin, The Stables in Mullingar and Monroe's in Galway.

Last year was a busy time for Lars as he was travelling between the studio recording for his debut album 'Lars Vincent – Demos (Part 1)' which was released in early 2017 along with headlining shows and being a support act for The Fureys on the home leg of their latest tour. During live sets Lars can be seen playing the acoustic guitar, the rhythm guitar and a six string banjo joined by fellow musicians Robbie Brennan and Stephen Burke.

His debut music video for the song 'People in Glasshouses' has over 1,000 views since its release in August of last year, with his debut album shortly following its release. The album consists of 15 original songs that Lars has written over the past five years. Lars has released his music on several different audio sharing platforms such as Soundcloud, Spotify and iTunes. His debut album is available for purchase through this email: larsvincentmusic@gmail.com



Yarn Bombers of Mountmellick

Haute couture for bicycles? A gúna nua for the gatepost? Stay still long enough in Mountmellick and you just might be knitted into loveliness for the annual yarnbombing campaign – guerilla art with a big, big heart.

Yarnification: it's not a word you'll find in the dictionary, but hang around with the yarnbombers of Mountmellick and you'll find more than just your vocabulary expanding.

How about that big, expanding grin as you pass crocheted flowers in window boxes? A wander through Mountmellick in August is a series of 'ahh' moments, all because of a group of people who firmly believe that "earth without art is eh." So says Nina Horan, who has been with the group since it started in June 2014, when an artist friend made a passing comment on Facebook that kicked off the movement.

Mountmellick has a proud and long history with textiles. Mountmellick Embroidery is internationally renowned and the last textile factory closed before the millennium. "Our purpose was two-fold: to make people smile and to positively enhance the profile of our beautiful town," adds Nina.

And so, following a dawn manoeuvre in September 2014, the people of Mountmellick awoke to see the streets and the lamp posts and the windows and the benches festooned with woolly colour. Although there were expert knitters and crocheters in the group from the beginning, novices started out with less technical projects, and so Nina admits they relied heavily

on bunting and pompoms for their first installation.

But as skills and techniques have improved and projects and schemes have become more daring, anything that stands still long enough is likely to be yarnbombed. "We have yarnified tennis rackets, lampshades, trees, fences, bridges, bikes, chairs, lamp posts, railings, street furniture and water pumps," says Nina. Every approach road to the town is also yarnified and prettified, leading to a double-take, and then an outbreak of delighted grins from passers-by. Where at Christmas bright lights are strung over signage along the main streets, in August, it's dream-catchers.

Nina maintains that the town's traders are enthusiastic and have seen a rise in business because drive-through traffic stops, parks up and walks around. Social media posts and coverage on local radio and RTÉ's Nationwide have added to goodwill around the project and so when the group approached traders for sponsorship last year to defray some of the expenses carried by group members (wool, cable ties, etc) Nina says "they responded in the most generous way."

The locals love it too.

"We did wonder how well it would be received but we should have known this town would

embrace it. Everybody loves it. Our esteemed senior citizens have been our best fans. Children love the madness. Teenagers think we are nuts. It's all good. Each year we see more and more homes and businesses with their own nod to our work. The wonderful women of the I.C.A. yarnbombed their own meetinghouse last year. It was a total riot of colour, truly jaw-dropping."

The group meets for two hours every Monday at the Community Arts Centre, which is also available to members "who may have a light bulb moment or a flash of inspiration on any other day of the week and need to put their ideas into immediate action." Some pieces are worked on exclusively at Yarnbombing HQ, some at kitchen tables and some are only revealed, even to members of the group, on the morning of the Big Reveal on the weekend before Electric Picnic.

It has been a joyful, energising guerilla art project that has expanded outside of Mountmellick, when Bloom in the Park, inspired by Nationwide, approached the group.

"We worked hard on our submission and to our delight, we were accepted. Those three days in the Phoenix Park were perhaps the most revealing: people just love what we do. People love fun. They love colour. It makes them smile. Job done!"



Lights...Camera...Action

in Longford College of Further Education

Budding TV and film-makers in Longford now have the option of furthering their interests thanks to a new course at Longford College of Further Education.

A QQI Level 5 course in Film and TV Production is being offered, with 15 students having taken up the pursuit in September last. Modules include Film Production, Television and Film Editing, Work Experience, Communications, Computer 3D Modelling and Animation, Audio Engineering, Image Processing and Digital Movie Processing.

"I've been making films and videos now for more than twenty years," explained Course Co-ordinator Shane Crossan, "and over that twenty years it has

become so accessible and the technology has flattened and gotten cheaper, which means anybody can make a film on their phone and publish it for the world to see. "But the craft of making a film hasn't changed," he pointed out. "It hasn't changed for 100 years and it's a highly involved process. People still need to learn the craft, the art of film-making."

Shane himself has spent many years learning and honing his art, and he holds an MA in Media Studies and an MSc in Education and Training Management,

so the students are in more than capable hands. "Before, there was no place for people to have a go at it," he added.

The students are now working toward making their own short films so that when the course is completed, they will have their certificate and a short film of which they can be proud. "They can then go on to do a level six in a college, if they choose," Shane concluded.

Offaly: Destination Festival

by Ciara Kelly

From a nostalgic week of costumes and fireworks to boutique weekends off the beaten track, Offaly is quickly becoming a destination for festivals to suit every taste.

Perhaps one of the most well-known and longest running of these festivals is *Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival* (4-11 August) taking place in and around the picturesque Georgian town in the south of Offaly. A programme which includes, but is certainly not limited to visual arts, food, craft fairs, music, theatre and nightly entertainment. A portion of these events are free and specially catered to children making it the ideal family orientated festival. Likewise a big emphasis is placed on gathering the community, with locals encouraged to dress up and participate, lining the streets for mainstays like the yearly parade.

In contrast, *BARE in the Woods* (9-11 June) is Offaly's newest festival, comprising mainly of music. Last year's festival saw legendary hip hop group *The Sugarhill Gang* as headline act, not too shabby! Located in the woods of Garryhinch, Portarlinton this year's line-up has recently been announced, it includes another iconic rap group – *House of Pain* as well as UK musician of *The Streets* fame Mike Skinner. *BARE* organisers also recently expanded to a three day event, building on the success of winning the title 'Best One Day Festival' at the Irish Festival Awards.

With the film industry in Ireland going from strength to strength, Birr's OFFline Film Festival (11-15 October) is approaching its eighth year of events such as filmmaking, workshops and screenings. Previous winner of the festival's Audience award, director Ben Cleary went on to win an Oscar for his film 'Stutterer' and the continued fostering of new talent is maintained with exciting events such as the 57 hour filmmaking challenge, putting teams through their paces producing a short that is screened at the end of the festival. Even at school age there is an opportunity for local young people to make their own short films, with the support of Offaly County Council's Arts Office entitled 'Mini Movies' which are also screened during the festival.

Set on the grounds of Charleville Castle, the aptly named *Castlepalooza* (4-6 August) is now a fixture on the Irish festival scene. Having been shortlisted for a

Green Award, *Castlepalooza* has an eco friendly ethos as well as a mandate that 50% of their performers be from the island of Ireland. This year's line-up includes musical acts such *Girl Band* and a dedicated comedy tent featuring Irish heavy hitters Deirdre O'Kane and PJ Gallagher. Attendees can choose from accessible camping options but also boutique camping on site in the form of pre-pitched tents, if revellers are averse to wellies and mud!

Creative pursuits such as writing may not conjure up images of a festival, however *Scripts - Ireland's Playwriting Festival* (13-16 July) combines a traditionally solitary activity with a weekend of developing nurturing and performing, taking an idea from paper to stage. For younger audiences, *Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival* takes place during the October Mid-Term Break in three towns in each corner of the county. With a diverse programme of workshops and performances in theatre, crafts, comedy, music and literature, *Hullabaloo* aims to spark the creative mind in every child.

For a more comprehensive guide to Offaly's arts festivals keep an eye on the Offaly Arts Facebook page and www.offaly.ie/arts.





Sundews are Ireland's answer to the venus fly trap - insect eating plants found commonly on active raised bogs. As the bogs are so acidic they get their nutrients from insects unfortunate enough to land on them, such as this lad. (Pic: Tina Claffey.)



An endangered curlew - their call could soon be a thing of the past if raised bogs and other habitats are not restored (Pic: John Carey)



Frogs are in abundance on raised bogs, but they too are in decline. This common frog (*Rana temporaria*) is resting on some of the beautifully coloured Sphagnum mosses that act as bog builders. (Pic: Tina Claffey.)

Artistic community of the midlands asked to dig deep and give their contributions to Ireland's largest

Raised Bog Restoration Project

The arts and cultural community of the midlands are being asked to make a cultural contribution to the largest raised bog restoration project ever undertaken in the state. 'The Living Bog' is currently underway at 12 bogs across the midlands, thanks to EU LIFE funding and further assistance from the Dept of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Intact Raised Bogs have become an all-too-rare feature on the Irish landscape. Where once over 310,000 hectares of raised bog made up the landscape of the midlands, it is now estimated as little as 1% of this great land mass remains as active raised bog. Peat harvesting and the use of peat for horticulture and energy production has meant that every bog in the region has been affected. Most are irreversibly damaged, many mortally wounded, but there are many others which can be restored and returned to full functionality.

Fifty three Raised Bogs have been designated as Natura 2000 sites and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). 'The Living Bog' project will improve over 2,600 hectares of important raised bog habitat over the next five years on the following: **Mongan, Moyclare, Clara, Raheenmore, Ferbane and Sharavogue Bogs** in Offaly; **Garriskill Bog** in Westmeath; **Ardagullion Bog** in Longford; **Killyconny Bog** in Meath / Cavan; **Derrinea and Carrowbehy / Caher Bogs** in Roscommon; and **Carrowmagappul** in Galway.

The scope of the project is huge: Over 182km of drains associated with peat harvesting will be blocked on high and cutover bog areas using over 15,000 dams. In raising water levels and effectively re-wetting the bogs, Raised Bog habitat equivalent to almost 7,000 Croke Parks will be improved by the project.

But the project is about more than just physical restoration. Just as our forefathers dug deep in the bog for fuel, the project team are asking the artistic community of the midlands to dig deep to find artistic and cultural inspiration.

As part of the project's outreach they are seeking to build a cultural portfolio associated with the bogs: be it bog memories, photographs, poems, stories, paintings etc. These will be collated into a book at the end of the project, and will also be highlighted

on the project website and on media associated with the Dept of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

'Living Bog' Public Awareness Manager Ronan Casey is keen to hear from anyone who may have something artistic to share about the bogs – no matter how trivial it may be.

MYSTERY

"Bogs have been an ever-present in Irish culture – in plays, poetry, books and art – yet never straightforward in their associations. Like the bog itself, with its liquid topography easily mistaken for solid ground, bogs are viewed as a place of mystery," says Casey.

"Even though there is an immense treasure-trove of work about the bogs in Irish literature and culture, there is much more hidden away, waiting to be seen, read or heard. People seem almost afraid to talk about the bogs, or to showcase an artistic association with a bog. Perhaps it's because they were regarded as wastelands, fuel sources or places of hardship and toil. Maybe it's because in literature bogs often evoked the mysterious and the macabre. Aside from notable exceptions, people didn't want to celebrate what is a totally unique, beautiful Irish landscape."

The bog poetry of Seamus Heaney, for example, cut through much of the mysticism that surrounds the other-worldliness of the bog,

Asked in the 1990's what poems he was most proud of, Heaney pointed to one in particular: *Bogland (for T.P. Flanagan)*. He said it was "one of the most important poems I had written." Heaney loved the bogland and thought it was "a beautiful place, physically" what with the flora and fauna, the water and the springy ground. Emotionally, he felt a great link to the bog and time and time again he would return there.

Asked why the bog served as an ideal vector for his poetry, he said it was "chiefly because it is the landscape that has a strange, assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood... I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened to it. Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own

poetry, I had a tentative, unrealised need to make a congruence between memory and bogland, and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness."

Heaney's bog poetry is a celebration of the physical beauty of the indefinable landscape of the bog. For him, the bog is a 'very beautiful, benign place' – a gentle, kind place that is linked to the people.

The links of the bogs to the people of the midlands is something Casey and the LIFE team – whose office is located in Mullingar – are looking to celebrate.

Over millennia, the bogs of the midlands were intricately linked with Irish culture and tradition. Whilst the realisation of the need to conserve our peatlands didn't develop at pace until the 1970's – too late to save many of Ireland's great Raised Bogs – it came in time to save some of the wounded remainders.

Often referred to as Ireland's rain forest, the remaining living bogs are of great importance for biodiversity, flood control and the control of carbon emissions. It is estimated that although bogs and peatlands cover just 3% of the world's total surface, they store twice as much carbon as all the forests in the world.

A living bog is a haven for many rare bird species – including the Curlew and Red Grouse. Raised Bogs are also home to a bewildering array of plant-life not found elsewhere. Specialist plants such as the carnivorous, fly-eating *Drosera* (Sundew) whose tentacles trap insects then suck the life from them are not found on other habitats in Ireland. The bog-building *Sphagnum* mosses that are abundant in boglands do not reach such importance anywhere else. Rare invertebrates, amphibians and insects can only flourish on an Irish Raised Bog.

As an education and recreational resource, the natural eco-system that is a Raised Bog is without equal in Ireland. As a landscape, it is totally unique. So, if you can answer the call for cultural contributions, whether it's a memory of a day on a bog, a poem or story long-since stored away, a painting, sketch or photograph, or even a yarn – you can contact the project by email: ronan.casey@ahg.gov.ie or phone 076 1002627.

Fishing with the KINGFISHERS



Saturday 14 May 2016 will remain a special day in the life of Mountmellick photographer Dominic Reddin, as this is the date that he was awarded a Fellowship from the Irish Photographic Federation in Mullingar at their Distinction sitting.

The Fellowship is the highest distinction awarded by the IPF and is normally awarded for distinguished ability/style in a specialist area of photography. To gain the F.I.F.P. Distinction, a panel of 20 images is required to be assessed by a panel of assessors to see if the body of work reaches the required standard to permit the Fellowship to be awarded.

Dominic presented his panel on the shy and elusive Kingfisher, the fastest and most stunningly beautiful bird of Irish rivers, showing the kingfishers doing what they do best, fishing for minnows. The panel of images captures the story of Kingfishers from flying, fishing from perches, to diving, catching fish underwater and then their re-emergence and feeding behaviour. He also captured what is known as 'the fish pass' which happens only after a pair of Kingfishers successfully build a nest by digging into mud banks on the river.

Over a period of four years Dominic has been photographing kingfishers in both the United Kingdom, and here in Ireland in Co. Laois on the Barrow River. For hours on end and sometimes for days he sat patiently waiting to hear their familiar call and watched them and managed to photograph them which eventually resulted in a stunning panel of images being put together to reach the Fellowship Standard.

Dominic is a member of Mountmellick Camera Club and has won many awards with the club over the last fifteen years including the club Photographer of the Year for the past six years. In January 2016 he was awarded the Midlands & West Region Nature Photographer of the Year. This was followed up by winning it again for a second year running in January 2017.

Primarily a landscape and wildlife photographer he has travelled to photograph the landscape of Scotland and various parts of the UK, he has also

captured many of the iconic beautiful landscapes in Ireland.

He is the National Secretary of the Irish Photographic Federation which is comprised of photographic clubs throughout the Republic of Ireland. It is governed by a National Council, the members of the Council being elected at the AGM from member clubs.

Over the years he has gained quite a few awards for his photography. The Fellowship awarded to him is his most distinguished and personal achievement and one he says has been such a great relief to have finally achieved. "My intention with this body of work was to show a photographic portfolio of the daily fishing behaviour of Kingfishers that can only be fully appreciated in the quiet but exciting moments that I have enjoyed while capturing them through my lens".

Sean's 'All Shook Up' and set for debut EP

2017 is shaping up to be a milestone year for Longford singer-songwriter Sean Rooney.

With a sophisticated, well polished sound, Sean has gained legions of fans, both online and during his captivating live gigs, and this year will see him release his debut EP. Outlining his first foray into the world of music, Sean explained; "Music started, I suppose, around the age of about thirteen or fourteen when I first heard pop punk. It was very upbeat and it just appealed to me for some reason so I kind of just went with that. "That's what got me into playing the guitar. I picked up my first guitar then and tried to make a go of it." Thankfully, he laughed, his tastes have broadened since the days of playing in cover bands with friends for the local battle of the bands. "It was around the age of about seventeen, I started getting into more rock music," he revealed. "Thanks to my Dad, I was listening to the likes of Aerosmith and that kind of thing, which I really liked, but I also got into Paul Weller at that age. "To this day he's still my favourite artist. He was heavily influenced by all the old Motown and soul records from America back in the late 60s and that kind of thing, so that comes through in his music and it put me on to that kind of music as well."

Music was always the plan for Sean, but he only became serious about his goal in recent years. Though he studied Music and Instrumental Technology in AIT, he left after a year and began to play with a wedding and corporate events band, The Bentley Boys. While the gigs were a lot of fun - and he made long-lasting friendships from their touring days - Sean admitted that it was at this

point that he fell out of love with music. "I had been writing songs with a friend of mine and that kind of petered out and I went through a period then of just playing gigs, trying to make a few quid and playing cover songs.

"It kind of made me fall out of love with music a bit, I didn't write anything at all for a good four years." It wasn't just frustration with the lack of writing that caused this change, however. It also stemmed from a struggle with his mental health, something which Sean is often praised for highlighting. His song, 'Everest High' speaks about his own experience with mental health and when posted online, was watched by more than 20,000 people. "There was definitely an element of depression that meant I didn't really want to do anything," he added. "Thankfully a couple of years ago I picked up a guitar, I think it was on a Monday, and I wrote the first song I'd written in about four years from start to finish.

"The reason that happened," he continued, "or the reason it was the first song I'd written fully was: before that I had attempted it but I had only managed to get a few lines of verse, and I would be so self critical that I would just wind up binning it, just throwing it out. And the more you do that, the more you feel like you've failed. It's like a vicious cycle. You just keep failing over and over again. So eventually, thankfully, I don't know what came over me, just an improvement in mood for a month or two - I don't know - but I kept going. I did that, and I still play that song ['In A Heartbeat'] and I'm fairly proud of it."



So far, Sean has two songs recorded for his EP, recorded between Longford and Dublin, and he's excited for the public to hear what he's been working on. "I think they sound great, the production is great," he smiled. "There is a teaser of one of the tracks online and people responded pretty positively to that so it looks good!"

In the meantime, as well as gigging around the country, thanks to the work of his hardworking manager, Rachel Masterson, Sean is taking a step back in time to the 1950s, as he performs his fourth role with St Mel's Musical Society in their 2017 production; 'All Shook Up'. Based on the music of Elvis Presley, Sean is taking on the lead role of Chad, one in which he is reveling. "The show is funny, the songs are great and the style is cool, that mid 50s rock and roll, so I can get into that big time," Sean laughed. "So I'm hoping that this is maybe, dare I say it, my best role. Hopefully - fingers crossed!"

To hear Sean's music and for details on upcoming gigs, search for Sean Rooney Music on Facebook.

Westmeath ARTS

A round-up of some of the projects, individuals and groups that were supported by Westmeath County Council Arts Office in 2016

In 2016 Westmeath County Council Arts Office supported the development of a broad range of projects, individuals and groups. 32 Bursaries provided to artists lent support in their development of their professional practice, for example residencies at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, putting together Art Exhibitions, and purchasing materials/supplies. Artist Hazel Revington-Cross (Delvin) exhibited works in the Edinburgh Arts Festival, while artist Avril Corroon (Mullingar) participated in a two month residency at a contemporary Art Gallery in Hoorn in the Netherlands. Artist Geraldine O'Reilly (Killucan) had an Art Exhibition in Poland.

The bursary also supported many writers – for example Dolores Keaveney (Mullingar) published her latest book called *The Hills Speak, History & Mystery* while Rory Duffy (Athlone) created new works including short stories, poems, radio and stage plays. His radio play *Paulo in the Underworld* can be heard at www.dramaonline.ie/podcasts.

The Arts-in-Community scheme provides project funding to encourage meaningful collaboration between professional artists and groups/organisations such as schools and healthcare and community centres, for arts projects including residencies.

The nature of this scheme facilitates the artist and the group to work together on a particular project over a period of time and provides community groups with an opportunity to engage with artists directly. The grants not only support individual artists, but are invaluable in providing assistance to Community Groups. In 2016 a range of organisations worked directly with Westmeath Artists – such as Lakelands Area Retreat and Cancer Centre (LARCC), Ashbrook Mental Health Day Centre, Temporary Emergency Accommodation Midlands (TEAM), Mullingar Resource Centre – Community Arts & Crafts, Irish Autism Network and Gateway Youth Project, Athlone.

The Art-Act-Grant offers grant aid to amateur, community or voluntary individuals, groups or organisations which stimulate public interest in the Arts. In 2016, support was provided directly to such groups – including 'Making Space' (A Community Arts Group based in Athlone), Athlone Writers Group, St Mary's Active Retirement, Athlone, Mullingar Camera Club, Brosna Art Group, Art in the Park, Moate Men's Shed project, Mullingar Harp School, 1428 Active Retirement Group based in Mullingar.

With such a wide spread of artists, organisations, groups and venues seeking support for their activities – grant allocations are modest. The reach of arts office supports covers a wide span of arts forms (theatre, dance, visual arts, literature, architecture, music, circus) as well as individual artists, groups, arts organisations and venues. The tangible benefits however are visible in the activities, engagements and projects that take place all across the county – enriching our lives and contributing to the uniqueness of artistic endeavour in County Westmeath. The grant forms for 2017 will be available on our website www.westmeathcoco.ie from the beginning of March 2017.



Smoke, Mirrors, Fog and Candlelight!

In the film lexicon there is a legendary anecdote about film director Stanley Kubrick fleeing 1970s Ireland while filming the period drama 'Barry Lyndon'. The story embroils a field of acting extras wearing red coats during a tumultuous time in Irish history and ends with a threatening phone call allegedly from the IRA with production moving swiftly across the pond and onto Europe.

With this tale as the basis of the most recent FilmOffaly winning script, director David O'Reilly set about creating his own story, a behind the scenes imagining of the Kubrick production and a love story to boot. David's background in film is primarily as a locations manager, working with the likes of Tim Burton and Michael Mann, on big budget Hollywood blockbusters most recently the sci-fi *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*.

Shooting began in O'Reilly's hometown of Tullamore last December with the primary location of Charleville Castle, but also the town itself. A crew of Irish and international talent descended on the worryingly foggy town to shoot as David explained in a recent interview with the IFTN online: "The local support was humbling. We had some amazing extras that came back day after day, in extremely cold conditions and I'm indebted to them for their commitment and patience. I can't wait to see everyone again in

more relaxed conditions when we have the screening in Tullamore."

Darragh O'Toole (Red Rock, South) also from the town, plays the role of an extra who becomes romantically involved with one of the Barry Lyndon crew played by Amy Hughes (Vikings). Though a short film, the production had all the markings of a bigger feature, owing to hard work by all involved, as David remarks: "The results, so far, are more than worth it – whether it's the beautiful performances of Darragh and Amy who have great chemistry on screen, the stunning cinematography from DOP Stil Williams and his super talented crew, all of our supporting actors and extras, costumes and locations."

As for the versatility of Offaly's locations, David remarked: "We recreated Dun Laoghaire port behind the Heritage Centre with a bit of smoke, a wet down and some of our extras and vintage

vans (and some amazing camera work from Stil and his camera and grip crew)." In the town itself we filmed in Bob Smyth's Pub and in the streets. We shot outside three churches across town with a vintage car in about 90 minutes."

Having wrapped shooting at the tail end of the year, post production has begun on the short film. "We have an editor working away now, music and poster artwork being produced and visual effects being developed. We're still working on securing a top talent for our narrator and Liam Neeson remains my ultimate choice."

FilmOffaly is Offaly's Film Commission and a project of Offaly County Council. In partnership with FilmBase the applications for 2017 short film award have been received and will be shortlisted with a winner announced later in the year. For more information visit www.filmoffaly.ie or for updates regarding the current project see 'Kubrick by Candlelight' on Facebook.





Looking at Longford's everyday people in a different way

Three Longford artists are going to give their audience a different view of the county, in an exciting exhibition set to take place in September.

Portrait artists Shelley Corcoran, Phil Atkinson and Angelika Sowul will display just one subject in three completely different ways. Using photography, airbrushing and pencil or sketch, respectively, Shelley, Phil and Angelika will bring their own unique styles and personalities to the exhibition.

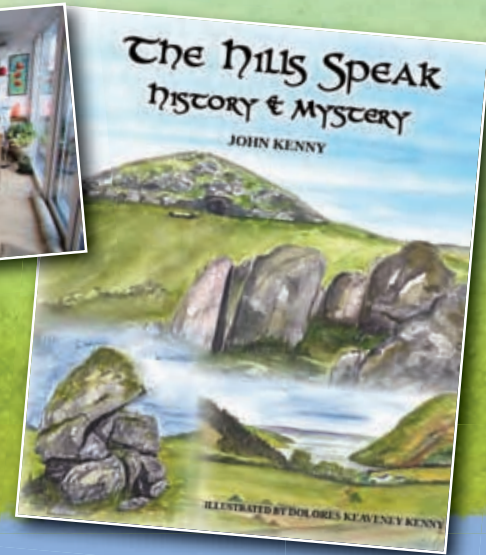
"Angelika's style is very Andy Warhol," Shelley explained. "Mine is photography, but not straightforward portraits. It's taking one element of each person I'm photographing and making that what the image is about. "Phil is working with a mix of fantasy and reality, quite extreme fantasy." Quoting Oscar Wilde, Shelley continued, "'Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter'. It gives a sense that although we're picking and portraying a subject, the exhibition is also about portraying us as artists."

Giving an insight into the reason they chose the subject of ordinary people, Shelley pointed out that in years gone by, portraits and photographs were only for the elite.

"Artists and photographers themselves then started straying away from that, because their interest was the everyday person.

"This is our first exhibition as a group and because our styles and media are so different, it could be interesting to have it as an annual or biannual event," Shelley concluded.

Dolores Keaveney



There is a wonderful tradition of children's writing and accompanying illustration in Ireland. Dolores Keaveney explores this wealth of talent and its influence on her...

When I was a young mother back in the early 1970s the very first book I bought for my young son was *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* written and illustrated by Judith Kerr. I still have this book today and I am really looking forward to her visit to Dublin in late March as part of the Mountains to Sea Book Festival.

Ireland is alive with wonderful children's book authors and illustrators; Niamh Sharkey is the creator and executive producer of Disney Junior's animated preschool series *Henry Hugglemonster*, and the author and illustrator of *I'm a Happy Hugglewug*. She has written and illustrated many other award winning books and was Laureate na nÓg 2012/2014. Patricia Forde from Galway is an award winning author who has written 21 or so books, some of them written in the Irish language. *Mise agus an Draguin* is one such book. John Boyne writes for older children and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is an award winning book which has been made into a very successful film. He has written many more award winning books. Oisín Magan is the author and illustrator of novels for older children such as *Forbidden Files* and *Mad Grandad*.

Eoin Colfer is the award winning author of the *Artemis Fowl* series. This is a series of eight science fantasy novels for teenagers. In 2015 Eoin was the Laureate na nÓg. These are only some of the wonderful traditional children's author/illustrators in this country.

There are also some great young self published authors such as Benji Bennett, an award winning author of a wonderful collection of books about his young son Adam. *Before I Sleep* is his first book and there are lots more. Julianne McKeigue, author and Laura Guinan illustrator, produced a wonderful book about a young hurler called *Andy Ash*... Emma Jane Leeson, author and Kim Shaw, illustrator of the *Johnny Magory Series*... Audrey Moore, author and Kim Sponaugie, illustrator of *Ping & PoLi*... George Dempsey Flanagan, author/illustrator of *The Adventures of Flopsy Hop The Rabbit in Origami Wonderland Series* and there are lots more.

In 2010 I self published my very first picture book *If I were a Bee*... I had been painting in watercolour for many years and had been in a local Bee Group. Out of the blue I was totally inspired to write about bees. *If I were a Bee* has never been out of print and is still very popular. Self publishing is not for the faint hearted and I certainly did not mind the challenge, so I put my heart and soul into getting this book out to the public. I got a distributor and all the shops and libraries supported me all the way. It was a great start. I have gone on to write and illustrate many more books.

Here is a list of my books to date: *If I were a Bee*, *Jenny the Little Brown Hen*, *Jenny an Chearc Beag Dhonn*, *Adventures of Jenny Sylvester & their Six Little Chicks*, *The Adventures of Hungry the Chick*, *Meet the Fairies in my Backyard*,

Beelicious Recipes with Honey, *The Scary Spider*, *Earth Angels are Everywhere; are you One?* I was honoured to have been asked to illustrate *Marlena the Fairy Princess Making Friends* for the late Mary Redmond, Founder of the Irish Hospice Foundation.

My husband John Kenny and I began a project to explore, describe, photograph and paint scenes from some of the little hills that dot our flat midland landscape. But as we began our investigation our horizon gradually expanded and soon we had twenty hills from the four provinces. It was a great project and my husband wrote the history and mystery and I painted over 150 watercolours and incorporated both into a book called *The Hills Speak; History and Mystery*. This was a great success for us and this book is almost out of print.

I am currently putting together a picture book about two little cats called *Duchess & Valkyrie were two little Cats*, which I have written and illustrated. I hope to launch this later in the year along with a small novel for 6/9 year olds. The little novel is about a very run down camper which landed in my yard. This is a book with a difference. I initially wrote the story and then my grandchildren came on board and added the characters and different adventures to it. Best of all, the book is illustrated by my grandchildren, all eight of them. I am really excited about this book and I think it will be well worth reading.

So life has been very busy for me over the past years and continues to be. I regularly read in libraries and schools, take part in book making workshops, and tour the country selling my books at Craft Fairs. Some of my books have made it across the globe to Hong Kong Library, to Fort Bragg in California and to many other exciting places. I hope this continues to be the case and I am looking forward to whatever the universe brings my way.

Check out Dolores on www.doloreskeaveney.com

“Self publishing is not for the faint hearted and I certainly did not mind the challenge, so I put my heart and soul into getting this book out to the public. I got a distributor and all the shops and libraries supported me all the way. It was a great start. I have gone on to write and illustrate many more books.”



New Theatre Company formed in Portlaoise

Portlaoise will have three brand new festivals this year celebrating everything from nature to drama to origami. One man is behind them all: the dynamic and energetic John Doheny.

John Doheny doesn't think there's anyone else in Ireland doing what he does – imagining, designing and building festivals. With the newly-founded Kiki Theatre Company he'll also be co-ordinating the production and workshoping with his brand new team to make high-quality theatrical, festival experiences for local audiences.

So May will see the Ogham Tree Festival of nature and arts with its own purpose-built stage and tree-themed installations. August heralds the Origami Festival to coincide with Electric Picnic, and in October there'll be the first Laois Drama festival for many years, but with specially commissioned theatre, interactive drama and a variety of conventional and obscure locations across Portlaoise.

What's even more interesting is that the Kiki team ranges from experienced professionals with considerable theatrical experience, to rank amateurs who want to be part of something new and vibrant on the Laois arts scene. "I set up Kiki with a vision," says John, who has the same message for everyone who has signed up. "Be creative under this umbrella and we'll work together. I say to them to get involved in every part of it, from sign-making to PR and everything in between, so when it comes to year two, you've moved on and the festival has moved on. You won't know what you're capable of unless you experience it."

The end goal isn't just to make amazing festivals and to grow them strategically year on year, but to enable Kiki members to eventually have the skills to create their own festival. "The group will be able to stand back afterwards and assess how the event went and will it go forwards," he says, adding that his crew is already up for starting their first twelve week block. That means six weeks of design followed by six

weeks of building the festival. It's a blast of work that's much more intense than John's own journey to developing Kiki.

After leaving school early to work, he went to college in Wales as a mature student. He laughs when he recalls starting his foundation course in drama and theatre studies not knowing the primary colours. "I knew I'd never be an actor, but my mentor said theatre production would be the way to go. So I got involved in the production of everything from opera to puppet shows to touring companies and I thought 'wow this is great.'" He finished being named designer of the year in his class and his prize was the chance to produce his design for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the college's fiftieth anniversary celebrations.

Back home, Portlaoise Credit Union asked him to build a St Patrick's Day float, "and I did that for a few years but then asked them to give me that money to create workshops on design and work with young people."

"Foroige were brilliant makers and designers, and Laois Youth Dance Ensemble were brilliant performers," he says of a hugely successful project that has lasted several years and has made the workshop model central to what he does.

Being asked to design the VIP area for the Life Festival in Westmeath made him wonder just how festivals were built from the ground up. And in typical, practical fashion, he made a model. "I started the Fisherstown festival with friends who were mad into trad and I wanted to use that as a template for how the next festival would work. We created three arenas, a family area with custom-made games, a market with sponsored market and craft stalls, and a main stage and it was a great experience."

Doheny no longer runs the festival, but the process is typical of his work methods. For many years he's been avidly building scale models – from shopfronts to the old town hall in Portlaoise, to sets for plays, working, for example, with the late Dick Bradish at Open Door Theatre. Despite being trained in CAD, computer aided design, he vastly prefers to see a project take shape in his hands at his workshop in Clonkeen. "The model gives you a feel for the layers, you know how it will scale up. You can see every single nail and brush mark and the hours required." This applies to building festivals too and at Fisherstown John had that same level of engagement with every small detail. "I still have the mentality where I get lost in the work. I get so engrossed, and if I'm not happy with where it's going, I stop and move on."

"The idea for the Origami festival came from folding while chatting," he says, and the plan is to make Portlaoise a destination for people travelling to Electric Picnic each year. He has a vision for origami sculptures all over town. Some will be up to four metres high, some will be in business foyers and some in public spaces. The workshops will give people the opportunity to build sculptures for their own locations – for example residents of a nursing home might create their own work. "Not everyone can go to Electric Picnic, but Portlaoise is thronged the week beforehand and we want people to have an experience."

If you'd like to be part of the Kiki experience, contact John, 085 169 6575 or email kikitheatre@gmail.com



Fleadh fever descends on Ballymahon

It's shaping up to be a very exciting summer in Longford, as Ballymahon gets set to welcome thousands of competitors and music enthusiasts to the 2017 Leinster Fleadh Cheoil. And though the main event will be based in the south Longford town, the organising committee have been working hard to organise a countywide, week-long programme of events.

"These will include a wide selection of outdoor and indoor events," a spokesperson revealed, before listing some of their plans. "Workshops, trad sessions in the pubs, singing, dancing, Aifreann Tradisiúnta, tours, promotion of Irish Language events, open air gig rig and most importantly, the Leinster Fleadh competitions, where competitors from the 12 counties of Leinster will compete for the All-Ireland Fleadh in Ennis 2017." Taking place from July 10 –

16, the competitions will form a major part of the event, but the committee has ensured that there is something to see and do for ages and tastes.

An important part of the Fleadh, according to the committee, are the workshops, which are open to any interested participants who are hoping to expand on their music techniques. "During the Fleadh weekend, trad sessions will be going on in pubs in Ballymahon and surrounding villages and towns in the county," the spokesperson continued. "Bring along your own instrument and join in the craic, or just come along and listen to some wonderful traditional music."

"The Fleadh open air gig rig will bring a feast of entertainment, too, with some of Leinster's finest local musicians and groups taking to the stage over

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memorable week for competitors, participants and visitors. With a jam-packed schedule of events and several accommodation options available – including a special Fleadh campsite at the GAA grounds on the N55 – there's no excuse not to visit Ballymahon this summer, for craic agus ceol.

For more information, email longfordcomhaltas@gmail.com.

a glimmer of an idea

by Gavin Cowley

What makes a good album cover? What makes a great record sleeve? Is it an illustration? A photograph? A certain layout? Was it maybe the typography? Or is it a combination of all these things? Certainly all of these elements were in my band Glimmermen's collective mind when it came to ideas for the cover of our new album 'Breakin' Out'.



We each felt that our cover had to reflect or represent the musical themes of the album, and obviously be attractive to the music buyer. With an impending deadline for our Japanese based Record label - Transduction Records we had to think fast and meet the production deadline.

From the start we received suggestions of everything from sculptors to designers to illustrators in the hope of finding something that worked. Lists were passed back and forth. Lists containing band names and album titles from other bands, examples of other artist's album covers. Ideas from the label in Japan, ideas from our own friends and relatives in the wider creative community all poured in. But nothing quite fit the theme and title.

As a Tullamore native a local photographer Paul Moore was a neighbour of mine from way back. We had grown up in the same housing estate. As a band we had used Paul for some shots of Glimmermen live from our gigs. Paul is a very talented photographer with a growing reputation for photography of all kinds. He is also a big music fan and would admit that his favourite shoots were of musical artists or live music. So Paul was a natural first port of call for an idea.

I spoke to Paul about the themes of the album and from the press release it went something along these lines. "Breakin' Out' touches on many themes, primarily the importance of being in the moment, the right now. Life can be tricky. Life can dictate a narrative for you if you let it. Don't let it!

Observations are delivered with a wry smile and at times, lonesome clarity."

We tried to make a lot of images work but nothing seemed to set the tone. Even within the images Paul had online we couldn't seem to find what we were looking for.

In a conversation I had with my sister Caroline about the themes of the album she had suggested an image she saw in the past that Paul had shared on his Facebook page. Immediately the image clicked. This was an image taken in the early 1980s by Paul's father Michael - himself also a keen photographer.

In the picture Paul is jumping off an old shed in scrap-land at the back of Arden Vale in Tullamore that was probably used as storage by builders in the estate. For us as children it seemed to be somewhat of a 'rite of passage' for the young people in our estate that if you could jump off the top of this old shed you were oh so brave! This was for us 'Breakin' Out'.

But the story didn't end there as that negative or print had to be located and Paul wasn't sure where the original was. We knew it was somewhere in the archives of his Dad Michael's many photographs. What if we couldn't find it? The social media shared image couldn't be used as it was a scan of a scan and very low resolution. Our planned cover was for a 12" vinyl record a large format for a picture.

Luckily Paul located it in the first packet which he opened. I got it from Tullamore, dropped it into a pro-camera shop to scan the negative high resolution in Dublin and the rest is history. We had our cover image. It just worked. In all its glory, no filters just a boy doing something daring on a Summer's day in the early 1980s in Tullamore.

The band loved it, Paul was delighted to be on the album cover, Paul's father Michael was delighted to have an image of his used for an album cover and the record label were delighted. Deadline met.

To date the album has been well received and the story of the cover a constant talking point. Glimmermen have been played numerous times on radio and appeared on the Arena Arts show on Radio 1.

- Glimmermen are: Gavin Cowley, J. Bassetti, Philip Murray and David Prendergast
- Glimmermen's album 'Breakin' Out is available from <http://transductionrecords.com/shop> or record shops nationwide
- Glimmermen's news and live dates can be found at <http://glimmermen.com>
- Paul Moore's Photography can be found at 500px.com/mooro
- Watch the new Glimmermen video for the current single 'All I Lack' on Youtube.



Laois Maker and Shaker



Whether it's creating enormous sculptures for public space, crafting beautiful vessels for private, indoor spaces or building unique, organic furniture, Alan Meredith is driven at all times by the same philosophy - to find the sculptural nature of functional work.

"Living on a farm means there were always things being made. And because I like to keep busy, the thing to do was make things." Alan Meredith's explanation for how he began with the art and craft of wood, has a deceptively simple root, but it illustrates a fascination, dedication and vision that started with childhood and has led to prize-winning success at the RDS National Craft Fair.

His list of awards, acknowledgements and commissions is extraordinary for one so young and one working with wood in so many different genres, from decorative pieces to furniture to large scale public sculpture. However it's less surprising when you realise he's really been building his career since he was eight or nine years old, old enough to hold a saw or hammer and build a kennel for his dog, then build a better kennel. He decided to study architecture even though he knew was never going to be in a conventional architectural practice. It's a decision that has allowed him to get to the place he really wants to be in – where having control of the design and the making of the piece allows for an extra layer of creativity.

"Technique only gets you so far," says the schoolboy who got As in engineering, technical drawing and construction studies. "There's a refinement – you resolve the work by being in control of the making of it – and it allows you to imagine work that you wouldn't imagine if you were at a remove from it," he says. This is especially true when the expressive nature of the work comes from the quality of the materials. "You need to be in contact with the material and understand its properties," he explains.

Teasing out a new finishing process with a small scale vessel can have an impact on the finishing of a chair and it gives a different insight into the possibilities when engaging in architectural scale public or functional sculpture. "It was always about how well you could make it, always about working with the material – that's the most important thing. But later I discovered an expressive quality in the work."

"That's what you're always doing when you make something well, looking for something more than the technique." And that's another reason why he opted for the process of becoming a qualified architect. A public art piece commissioned under the Percent for Art Scheme at Newpark Comprehensive in Dublin – at once sculpture, walkway and seating area – is much more than the sum of its parts. "It's about place-making," says Alan. "It's about creating an image for the school, a calling card, so that when someone sees this, they immediately associate it with the school." Likewise, the students who came to Alan's Mountmellick studio during the project, and those who will go on to create temporary installations within the sculpture, "all have some purchase in the work." It belongs to them but it's also of them.

A typical day now sees him making unique vessels for exhibition and furniture for one of Ireland's most exclusive hotels, and vessels and furniture for exhibition at the RDS in May. "It depends on the project I'm working on – I'll be in the workshop during the day, or meeting clients and in the evenings I'm more likely to be at my desk designing." The space where art and craft meets is changing all the time, and looking at his body of work makes it clear that Alan is at that nexus, where artists are being seen as having a social purpose.

"There's an opening now for studio-craft to enter the space art once occupied," he says. And he's already there.
Contact: studio@alanmeredith.ie
Tel: 087-1371085

DANCEYOURDREAM

Westmeath based Elevate Academy of Dance delivers a diverse range of dance styles and classes

A new academy was established in the midlands in August 2016. Based in Mullingar, *Elevate Academy of Dance* began the dance season training for the Prima Lyrical dance competition hosted by the World Lyrical Dance Federation. Elevate's under 12 years squad and over 14 years squad participated in the competition as well as many soloist dancers. It was a successful day for the dancers as they won medals and trophies for both squad and solo awards. Since it opened six months ago, *Elevate* have had over 125 dance students join their dance classes. *Elevate Academy of Dance* is under the direction of Aimee Mac Manus, BA hons Dance Studies. Aimee has been involved in the dance world all her life and previously owned another dance school for ten years. To celebrate her ten years within the performing arts, Aimee decided to return to dance studies.

"Straight after I finished my degree in the University of Wolverhampton I applied for a Masters in Dance at University of Limerick. I underwent two weeks of the course when I realised that I had not experienced enough of dance outside of education. It was a highly intense course which sometimes relied on your knowledge and experiences gained from your time spent within the dance world. Jean Butler had studied the course the year previous to me. Jean had a world of experience behind her with 'Riverdance' and other dance opportunities. Other dancers on the course were at the age I am now, late twenties/early thirties. I felt I wasn't ready at the time and I always dreamed of returning to study dance in some form or other. Since returning to dance studies with the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing in 2015 I have established *Elevate Academy of Dance*."

Elevate is the dance academy in the midlands with a difference. It will be offering Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing Grades and Vocational examinations in Modern Theatre in Autumn 2017. This dance examination board is recognised worldwide and training can be continued in third level education for the aspiring dancer. For the more relaxed, classes in Jazz, Lyrical, Contemporary, Musical Theatre and Hip Hop are available. Acro-Dance classes are on offer to the dancer who would like to become more flexible and in all a stronger dancer. Acro enhances a dancer's range of artistic and stylistic movement. Eventually the dancer will be able to take an exam in Acro-Dance, another great opportunity for the dancer to build their portfolio.

The *Elevate* slogan is 'Dance Upon Your Dream'. Whatever your dream may be, if it's a career in dance or a passionate hobby alongside creating your hopes and dreams, this dance academy has an exhilarating dance experience and exciting dance achievements for every type of dancer, beginning at the young age of four years old. Happiness through dance is its foremost objective. None of the classes or performance opportunities are compulsory, but these performance opportunities are where a dancer learns to gain confidence in and out of the dance studio.





(Pic: Becky Venteicher)



(Pic: John Rich)

Expressions to host outdoor art exhibition

After drawing in hundreds of entries from all over Ireland and abroad over the past two years, the organising committee behind the successful Expressions portrait photography competition and exhibition are further expanding the event by bringing art to the streets of Longford town.

2017 will mark the third year of the competition, and it has grown and developed far beyond the committee's hopes and expectations. The second annual Expressions portrait photography competition and exhibition took place in October 2016, with the shortlisted entries being presented in an exhibition at the Backstage Theatre, and also published in a keepsake souvenir booklet. There could have been many worthy winners, but it was Boston-based photographer John Rich who took the top spot with his thought-provoking piece based on the subject of alopecia.

Meanwhile, there were four highly-commended photographers; Naomhan Joyce, Edit Elias, Aleksandra Klimczak and Michelle Hughes Walsh. Though he wasn't there in person to accept his award, John Rich expressed his delight in a pre-recorded video, which was shown on the night. "I just want to say thank you to everybody associated with putting on the exhibition. I'm grateful to have been included in the show and I'm ecstatic about having been chosen as a winner," he said.

Speaking at the launch of the exhibition, Photographer and Expressions committee member Shelley Corcoran addressed the artists in attendance; "Both ourselves, the Expressions committee and the

judges, feel honoured that you have laid bare your work for us to look at and show here today so we're delighted you have done that. As you can see here the work is of such a high standard both conceptually and technically and we kind of feel that we know you a little bit from showing us your work and entering into our competition."

Congratulating the artists, committee member Angelika Sowul added her delight at being part of the competition and exhibition; "I have a chance to see so much talent and the photographs we can admire today are so deep and creative." This July, in conjunction with the annual Cruthú Arts Festival, the exhibition will be brought to the great outdoors in an ambitious move for the committee.

"We're using Longford town as an exhibition space," organiser Shelley Corcoran revealed. "All fifty images from the finalists will be blown up and hung up in various locations throughout town, from Earl Street right up to the Barracks." This initiative, according to Shelley, will allow more people to experience and appreciate the works. "It's to make it accessible to everybody so they can appreciate it, and to make art a part of everyone's everyday life. As Frida Kahlo said, 'I leave you my portrait so that you will have my presence all the days and nights that I am away from

you'. That's what we're doing, we're leaving it with people in the street so they can stand and look at it, go away and come back the next day and maybe see something that they didn't see before."

"It's going to be an open air photography exhibition," said organiser and County Arts Officer Fergus Kennedy. "We're taking a wild leap of faith on the weather in Longford in July," he laughed. "We're receiving submissions from all over the globe so now our challenge is to penetrate public awareness." There will be a walking route and a map, Fergus revealed, pointing out that visitors would be able to make their way through the town to view all the shortlisted portraits. "We're also hoping to have some of the artists to stand with their works and talk to the public, explaining their photograph," he added.

"We never want it to get stale," Shelley continued, "and to be just another portrait exhibition. That's why we're reaching further afield with entrants and contacting different countries to cast our net as far as we possibly can to engage with as many photographers as we can."

For more information, visit www.longforddigitalarts.ie or search for Expressions Exhibition and Awards on Facebook.

Singfest 2017

Ella Fitzgerald famously said 'the only thing better than singing is more singing' and that is certainly true here in the midlands.

Over the last four years, thousands of children and young people have had the opportunity to work with a Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath musician and embark on a journey of performance music education – and my, do we love to perform!

Singfest 2016 was supposed to be a 'once-off' three-day festival of singing, developed by Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath in partnership with the Association of Irish Choirs. It was made possible through funding from the Music Generation/Arts Council Partnership. Inspired by our love of singing and for performing, the festival combined two 'Big Sing' Days with a Gala Concert featuring our Singfest choirs and a new school choir – all under the watchful eye of our artistic director and conductor Greg Beardsell of the Irish Youth Choir and Cross Border Orchestra of Ireland and the Singfest team, musicians of the Irish Youth Choir and MGOW.

Big Sings are choral events where singers are both performer and audience. The positive atmosphere created at these large scale singing events has to be experienced to be believed as singers, connected to one another by the music and shared activity of singing, are able to 'find' their voices and discover the joy of singing together and that's exactly what happened last year. A thousand young singers from MGOW partner schools joined us for a day of workshops leading to the main event, the 'Big Sing'. The days were simply fantastic! Filled with fun and excitement the singing was simply superb ... so we're now planning Singfest 2017.

The Singfest 2017 Big Sing Days will take place on 8 and 9 June and the Gala Concert featuring the Singfest Choirs and MGOW School Choir on 10 June in Athlone Institute of Technology. Follow Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath on Facebook for information on the event and tickets.



the Transformative Power of Art

by Manchán Magan

The active process of making art, or even passively experiencing it, can transport us elsewhere, transforming us at a deep level. It can play a key role in helping us overcome challenges in our hearts, minds and bodies. And so, who in the Midlands are the pioneers trailblazing the transformational potential of art?

One of the most proactive groups is *Anam Beo*, an independent arts and health organisation based in Offaly who last year held over 130 art sessions at 8 different healthcare locations, including Birr Mental Health Centre, Clara Day Care, the National Learning Network Tullamore and the Irish Wheelchair Association centre at Ballinagar.

The fruits of their work were celebrated at last year's '100 Years 100 Faces' Exhibition in Tullamore Arts Centre, which offered an inspiring glimpse into the portraiture, quilting, collage-work and documentary films they had facilitated over the year. It offered powerful proof of the shared eloquence and wisdom of the elderly, the ill, the injured and the disabled when given the opportunity and guidance to document their perspective on the world through art.

One of the most high profile examples of using art to improve health in recent years was *Box of Frogs* in which the actress Mary McEvoy, the comedian John Moynes and broadcaster Dil Wickremasinghe used their personal experiences of mental health problems to spark conversation and challenge stigma surrounding issues of depression, anxiety, bereavement and suicide. It offered both entertainment and a cathartic process of de-mystifying and debunking the hidden workings of our mind. The show was performed in Birr, Mullingar and Stradbally, Co Laois, as well as touring nationwide, where it managed to tease out audiences' thoughts on issues from eating disorders to bullying in a light-hearted way. As an example of how impactful such work can be, 91% of audience members surveyed said that the play would change how they behaved, with people leaving comments such as: 'I will be more open and considerate.'... 'It will help me to deal with my partner's problems.'

Our society is becoming ever more open about issues of mental and physical health; having come from a place of shame and stigma to a point where we openly acknowledge the struggles that beset all of us occasionally. The Midlands 103 broadcaster, Ann-Marie Kelly, saw an opportunity to cast further light on the issue by documenting the experiences of Wally O'Loughlin, a Portlaoise rapper who attempted suicide in 2009. Over 18 months she recorded his life for a film about his struggles to find a way of expressing his frustrations and sadness. As he told the RTE News in 2012, "I knew I needed help, but I was too self-proud to ask for it, and ashamed to say I have a problem, as people see me as Wally the Rapper and

think, "he's deadly, he's mad, he has great songs, but behind it all I was actually crying out for help."

Kelly's film 'Wally' led to a series of workshops called the 'Hear Me See Me' project, in which young people explored ways of communicating their feelings through song, film and radio. With help from Birr's Hello Camera film collective and Will Faulkner of Midlands 103, 40 participants made two radio shows, a short film and recorded three songs addressing issues such as depression and heavy drinking. It was a way of highlighting the potential of the arts as a means of self-expression and an aid to reflection and self-examination.

Numerous studies have now shown the transformative and restorative power of art to decrease pain and anxiety in patients, and ideally, everyone who finds themselves bed-bound for an extended period would have the opportunity to engage in arts practise. Already, in the United States 50% of hospitals offer an art programme. Florence Nightingale wrote in her *Notes for Nursing* in 1860, about patients' need for beauty and how the effect is not only on the mind, but on the body as well. Even, back in the 14th Century religious-run hospitals had paintings depicting salvation (or damnation) as a way of offering patients a wider perspective.... and sinners a last chance at redemption!

In 2012, the Midlands Regional Hospital in Tullamore ran a programme in their Renal Unit in which dialysis patients learnt the skills of block printing as a way of enriching the three hours they spent three times each week undergoing dialysis. The artists, Tina Gaffey and Kieran Brennan helped the patients create a series of block printed artworks by their bedsides as a way of passing time and encouraging them to find their creative voice. Their prints were collated into a final installation titled, *Sanctuary*, that was exhibited at Aras an Chontae, Tullamore in 2012 and also on display in the atrium of Tullamore Hospital.

Currently, in Mullingar Resource Centre the artist Lucy Tormey is working on an art project with historian, Ruth Illingworth and a group of adults with intellectual disabilities. They are distilling themes and visual depictions of the history of Mullingar with a view to creating a large-scale mural at the parking space at Blackhall in Mullingar. For Tormey, it's about introducing people to the potency of art "as a language that we see and feel. It can help open us to endless possibilities of exploration and making. This is

good for us in so many ways: it gives us purpose, it centres us, it renews and sustains us. I think we can discover the essence of our true selves within it."

No group is more in need of discovering their true selves than teenagers and the Jigsaw Youth Support Service in Offaly has been grappling with this issue for years. In 2015 and 2016 they collaborated with Headstrong and Offaly Youth Theatre to create *Write Your Mind*, a collaborative arts project for youths aged 12-25 that dealt with mental health issues.

Seven writers, eight performers, two professional artists and a Youth Advisory Panel of 26 young people worked over a year to create two live theatre performances at Birr Theatre & Arts Centre in 2015 and at Dunamase Arts Centre in 2016. The final six monologues were honed and shaped by the playwright and screenwriter Eugene O'Brien (*Eden*, *Pure Mule*, *Red Rock*) and the director Angela Ryan Whyte, blending professional guidance with a youth perspective that made it relevant to their target audience. Overall, the pieces offered a really impactful way of exploring anxiety, bullying, self-harm, domestic violence, sexual identity and depression.

In terms of arts therapy initiatives, the *Let's Connect* exhibition at Dunamase Arts Centre in 2013 stands out for the amount of press coverage it received. The theme of the exhibition was how visual art intersects and contributes to our health and wellbeing, and it brought together national and international artists such as Brian Maguire, Niamh Boyce, Geraldine O'Reilly and Eilis Crean, alongside artists using Laois Mental Health Services. It was the brainchild of HSE Clinical Nurse Specialist, Angela Delaney who has run many innovative art therapy programmes in the region. At the time, she commented: "By coming together as a community we are highlighting the importance of taking care of our mental health, through engaging with each other and encouraging participation in activities in our local community. These initiatives promote socialisation and helps remove some of the stigma around mental health illness that continues to exist, but is thankfully changing."

In truth, there are now so many groups and individuals using art to foster health in the Midlands that no single article could do them justice. The Irish Association of Creative Art Therapists, www.IACAT.ie, lists drama, art and music therapists throughout the region. In Longford, there's the



Anam Beo Art Exhibition

Schools Photography Programme which won a national award for its treatment of mental illness among teenagers and which has continually made strides to encourage secondary schools to explore and engage with issues of social relevance through photography. In Westmeath, Ursula Meehan and Teresa Doyle have been involved in scores of arts therapy initiatives throughout the county, while St Loman's Psychiatric Hospital in Mullingar has also taken a lead in bridging private art therapy with public exhibitions, such as its poster collage exhibition last year or the 'Masked Emotions' exhibition in 2015 involving a series of Plaster-of-Paris masks made by patients under the tutelage of the occupational therapist, Abiola De Mojeed.

Our society is undoubtedly becoming ever more enlightened and proactive about dealing with issues of mental and physical health, and yet there is still so much work to be done. So many of us now recognise the power of art to help us through difficult times, whether physical or mental. It's a sacramental, almost magical, practise, and as such, it is of paramount importance that we all get to have access to the facilities and guidance to use art on our road to recovery.



Wally O'Loughlin
(Pic: Ann Marie Kelly)



Erica Borges and the Laois Youth Dance Ensemble

Erica Borges, founder of Laois Youth Dance Ensemble may be Brazilian at heart but her steps are entirely modern. She's been telling Claire O'Brien how she's definitely "not a samba girl."

Thanks to uncles who played Black Sabbath while they babysat her, Erica has very different tastes. "I'm a black girl and a lot of people think it's strange that I like heavy metal – they expect me to be into R&B. Especially when I got into ballet, people thought it was strange that I could like ballet and heavy metal music." She has a background in drama and grew up with samba steps. She also studied ballet but it was contemporary dance that spoke to her.

It was also the force that propelled her away from a commute and office job in Dublin surrounded by people who were mostly bored, unhappy and working for money to save. "I didn't want that. I wanted something I could do with passion," she says and decided to study dance first in Inchicore and later in Limerick. That, and her love of working with young people, led to the birth of LYDE. "It's a safe environment for dancers and non-dancers to do dance, and enjoy themselves and feel loved – and not feel like a product, but feel welcome," says Erica, who has nine junior and ten senior students under her at Dunamais Theatre.

It's more than just a dance class. It's a dance company, a long-term commitment. Each two-hour session involves half an hour of warm-up and learning new technique and the remainder is spent on developing, choreographing and rehearsing a piece. Erica herself does most of the choreography, but students get a lot of freedom and some of this year's four pieces are based wholly on the dancers' own ideas.

Unless they study music, much of what they dance to will be unfamiliar. There's a lot of instrumental music, sometimes gospel, but rarely songs that are current on the radio. "Instead I want the girls to grow with the music – to listen and be moved by the music and to understand that by listening I can let my body respond." Some of those performance pieces feature at the annual Laois Dance Platform, which has grown into a three day, international dance festival supported by Arts Council funding, which Erica says makes an enormous difference to the running and the status of the event. "It started from a small seed in 2013 and I never thought it would be a festival. When I first came up with the idea it was to involve local teachers and dancers, so that locals can see what professionals do outside the

county, but not many dance schools were supporting us. This year Arts Council funding allows us to invite groups from Dublin, Wicklow and outside Ireland."

A perfectionist at heart, she makes sure there'll be extra rehearsals for the girls in LYDE in advance of that March performance on top of Erica's work of organising and promoting the festival and welcoming dancers like Nick Bryson and John Scott. "I'm always making the production sharper and better. I tell the girls you need to give everything you have in the best way you have. That's not just for parents to say it was lovely and it was worth their money, but for the dancers to be proud they have achieved something that's actually good."

"I'm so lucky, especially at the start I knew it was hard and it's still financially struggling, but now we see the fruits in the teenagers. We see parents with tears in their eyes saying, 'she was being bullied, but dance has changed her.' That's better than a million euro. When you see the fruits, you say it was absolutely worth it."

For further information, contact info@lyde.ie

Midlands Youth Orchestra performs at the 22nd Festival of Youth Orchestras

This Spring the 22nd Festival of Youth Orchestras will take place. It will see over 400 young players from around Ireland perform classical works and arrangements for youth orchestra in a variety of styles. Performances include A Celtic Suite, Lord of the Dance, 'Farandole' by Bizet, 'Slavonic Dance' by Dvořák, 'Suite for Strings' by Joan Trimble and Mussorgsky's 'Night on Bare Mountain'. It's a family event not to be missed.

The Irish Midlands Youth Orchestra has been chosen as one of four orchestras from around the country to perform in the evening slot of this highly respected event. Irish Midlands Youth Orchestra is a well established group of musicians aged between 12 and 21, from all over the Midlands including Westmeath, Offaly, Laois, Kildare, Meath, Roscommon and Longford. The orchestra will be lead by musical director and conductor, Matt Rafter.

Over 7,000 talented, young musicians have performed at the Festival of Youth Orchestras since its establishment.



Matt Rafter, conductor



Making masterpieces at St Christopher's

It's a small building but there's plenty of life in the art room at St Christopher's.

Beautiful handmade cards, paintings and photographs; unique pieces of jewellery and snapshots of awards won, projects completed and trips made fill every corner of the room. Art Programme Director at St Christopher's, Jean Healy, has been facilitating art lessons, workshops and projects for pupils and service users since January 2000, and the artists have packed a lot into 17 years. "In 2013, we did 'Our Town'", Jean explained. "We did an exhibition in shop windows in Ballymahon and Edgeworthstown for the months of May and June." This included felt work, sculptures and paintings, which related to the shops and premises in which they were placed. "We were doing preparation work for that for about two years," said Jean. "We worked with school groups and elderly groups, it was a collaborative project."

One of the pieces saw pupils from a local national school interview the service users for a special book. This book was then decoupage onto a table and chair so that those viewing the art were also viewing a story. "There were 63 shops involved, it was huge," Jean recalled. "The Mexican Ambassador came down and viewed it. Our 2013 calendar was given over to that project and the Ambassador came down and launched that. Out of that then, the County Council nominated us for the 'Pride of Place Art in the Community' award," Jean smiled. "When the judges came down, we felt the best way to show our work was to have stalls."

The artists set up stalls which showed off all the projects and media that they use in their weekly art classes. The judges, according to Jean, were blown away, so much so that St Christopher's went on to win the award! "They had never seen a programme like it in any of the counties. It was amazing. For me, it really lifted us up." As well as wonderful collaborative projects, appearances on Irish TV and RTÉ, solo and group exhibitions and their annual calendar, the art department also opens a pop up shop every two years, which is manned by the artists themselves. "Before we had the pop-up shop, we used to do craft fairs," explained Frances Tynan, who is a particular fan of knitting and card-making. "We decided then that we'd do the pop-up shop every second year."

"The craft fair was a one day thing," Jean added. "But now we have a three-week-long pop up

shop." In between pop-up shops, concerts are held at the Backstage Theatre, while the artists make use of the Atrium Gallery to show off their year's work. Photography is another element of their work, of which Tommy Sullivan is particularly fond. Volunteer Martin Crinigan carries out workshops for the programme, and six photos from the calendar are dedicated to the talented photographers at St Christopher's. "I did the course last year," Tommy told Midlands Arts and Culture. "I did a good bit at home already but I learned a lot." Being a keen gardener, Tommy's favourite thing to photograph is nature, and he was particularly looking forward to the spring and summer months for some colourful photos. Tommy also enjoys sculpting, and a piece that he made out of willow was purchased by an admirer who spotted it online, and it now hangs in the corporate headquarters of Warden Brooks in the United States of America!

Trips away to meet artists and view exhibitions, from Achill to Mountmellick, are also part and parcel of an artist's life at St Christopher's. The programme is also self-sustaining, a fact of which Jean is very proud. "We use a lot of recycled materials, so the art programme is completely self funded. We make money for St Christopher's, and we make enough that we can buy the materials we need ourselves." The cards are a popular item, according to Jean. It's Tríona Maloney's favourite project and alongside Frances and two other service users, they make beautiful greetings cards for all occasions. They have plenty pre-made, but personalised items can also be ordered.

Jean works with 100 pupils and service users every week, and just like Frances, Tommy and Tríona, they all have their own individual interests, which are all supported. "It's very much an individual programme," Jean nodded. "While I would have 4 - 10 people per group, I look at each person individually."

"It's fun, we all get on well," she grinned. "Everyone looks forward to coming and I look forward to seeing them."

"We have a very good teacher to teach us all," Frances concluded. "People wouldn't want to come back if the person wasn't like Jean!"



Birr Festival of Music & Voice

Birr is preparing itself for its first ever classical music festival, the Birr Festival of Music & Voice, taking place throughout the Midlands town from Friday 26-Sunday 28 May 2017. Incorporating the Trench Award, now in its fourth year, this thrilling weekend will feature performances by world class artists in voice and instrument, masterclasses given by an international panel, as well as the Birr Young Voices project. In addition, classical music will be heard in unexpected places, indoor and out!

Top of the bill is sure to be internationally acclaimed baritone Bruno Caproni. Along with renowned pianist Julian Evans, they will open the festival at Birr Theatre & Arts Centre on Friday 26 May. Mr Caproni has appeared as a leading Verdi baritone in many of the world's major opera houses including La Scala Milan, Vienna Staatsoper, The Metropolitan Opera New York, Royal Opera Covent Garden and Komische Oper Berlin. He has also sung with some of the greatest singers, past and present, including Jose Carreras, Montserrat Caballe, Plácido Domingo, Renee Fleming, Angela Gheorghiu, Luciano Pavarotti and Rolando Villazon.

Pianist Julian Evans pursues an extensive career as soloist in the major European concert halls. He is a prolific recording artist, frequently heard on radio and T.V. and drawing sensational reviews.

Another highlight is one of the most exciting and vibrant chamber ensembles performing today, the RTÉ ConTempo Quartet, who will take to the stage at Birr Theatre & Arts Centre on Saturday 27 May. Praised as a 'fabulous foursome, full of imaginative daring' the quartet has performed more than 2000 concerts in 46 countries! They have broadcast widely, collaborating with great artists in numerous projects.

Sunday evening sees The Trench Award Gala Concert, where six Midlands musicians of the future will perform a repertoire of solo instrument and song, during which the recipient of the Trench Award 2017 and other bursaries will be selected by a distinguished panel. Past recipients are forging successful careers in the UK, Germany, Wales, and Ireland. The inaugural performance of Birr Young Voices will also take place on Sunday 28 May. With 30-40 children, aged between 9-12 years, the event will be the culmination of ten weeks of workshops and classes under the direction of a professional children's choral team in partnership with Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath, supported by the Trench Trust.

Director of the Festival, Maureen de Forge said: "A major aim of the Festival is to enhance the profile and enjoyment of classical music for all, giving both participants and audiences in Birr and the Midland region the highest level of professional excellence." The Birr Festival of Music & Voice programme is available from mid-March and online from www.birrtheatre.com

Fore, North Westmeath takes national spotlight as tiny trail named Best Heritage Project in Ireland



In north Westmeath, there is a tiny looped trail that winds through a handsome, ruined abbey, along a spring-fed stream that contains water that can run uphill and will never boil. As you wander with it through the valley of Fore, you are stepping into a peaceful and serene world, undisturbed by the sights and sounds of a modern world.

Here people still tie small pieces of cloth to the ash tree and pray for intercession. Here children still throw a coin from the bridge and close their eyes tight to make a wish. Here people still feel a connection with the landscape and the people who for centuries came here to follow a spiritual path. Just 3.5km long, St. Fechin's Trail in Westmeath was just named the Best Heritage Project in Ireland.

The looped walk begins in the car-park that lies between the 13th Century Norman Abbey and the earlier St. Fechin's Church and the Mausoleum that sits like a toy castle in front of a dramatic chiselled limestone backdrop. It leads through an avenue of trees that were planted for the Eucharistic Congress and up along the foothills of Westmeath's second highest point the Ben of Fore.

Since it opened a local community group, called 'Pilgrim's Trail and Tale' has created a series of events showcasing both the area and the amazing people who live here. The trail itself has a portion remembering two friends, Nancy and Nelly and the little pathway they forged across the fields between each other's homes. The trail is used by both visitors

and the local community and it has become an amazing meeting place for the two. In our events and guided walks, we mix heritage and culture in a way that is all about the community of Fore being the actual tourism asset and this amazing valley is our stage.

Úna D'Arcy, chairperson of the Pilgrim's Trail and Tale committee says "...over the years we have considered what work would have gone on in this monastic community and then we have found the same crafts – so for example the wonderful Fergus Corrigan, a talented stone carver, brought along his tools and materials and set up just below the abbey on the trail and all day people visiting the abbey could hear the story of stone carving both today and for the monastic communities. At another event, Helen Kelly brought down her draught horse, an example of living Irish Heritage and artist Teresa Doyle made dolls and gathered stories as she worked in front of a lovely old cottage. We have also had language workshops, exploring the heritage of our field names and town lands, we have had authentic replica weapons and armour for all the different

periods of history for people to try on and learn about, foraging for food and re-learning old superstitions and cures. We have engaged with our artists, to create workshops relating to the area's history and we have also embraced the serenity and spirituality of the area with mindfulness workshops."

D'Arcy adds "... it was an honour to be shortlisted and wonderful to be selected as winners. We were up against the state's key 1916 projects Richmond Barracks, Waterways Ireland's National canal project, the Lough Gur Heritage project, Seamus Heaney's Homeplace in Mid Ulster and Cork County Council's 1916 Center for Commemoration. They are all amazing heritage projects."

The trail was first developed on paper in 1986 as part of a plan for three looped walks of 3km, 5km and 8km by then county engineer Jim Hearn and draftsman Richard McCabe. The trail was developed with the support of €125,000 of LEADER funding and received the expertise and support of Westmeath County Council as well as a further €20,000 in funding.

Laois Youth Theatre News

Laois Youth Theatre Portlaoise are busy rehearsing for their upcoming performances on 29 April in the Dunamase Arts Centre at 3pm. The 12 to 15 year old members will present "Around the World in 80 Days" an hilarious adaptation of Jules Verne's classic, by Philip Brennan and Stephen Colfer. Tickets are priced at €8 and €5.

The seasoned 15-18 year olds will present "Wrap up Warm" an entertaining and intriguing show that they have written themselves and one that showcases the creative talent within the group.

The shows are directed by Siobhán Coffey, their Coordinator. Weekly workshops take place in the Youth Education Centre, Portlaoise on Fridays for young people.



New Youth Theatre Groups are starting up in Mountrath and Rathdowney. They will be supported by the Laois Arts Office. There will be Easter Drama Camps in Mountrath and Rathdowney. Further details from the Arts Office at artsoff@laoiscoco.ie and T: 057 8664033/13

BEALTAINÉ

Festival 2017 in Laois

County Laois once again celebrates creativity in older age with the annual May-time Bealtaine Festival. A full programme of events in Laois will take place including performances by music duet “Tandem” from the Showband Show era in Abbeyleix and Mountmellick hospitals for a trip down memory lane in music, song and story.

There will be the launch of an exhibition titled “Doorways of Stradbally” by artists from the Stradbally Active Retirement Group. The exhibition will include twelve original paintings, each depicting a different historic doorway in the town. The exhibition will be launched by Anna May McHugh, Chief Executive of the National Ploughing Championships on 6 May at 1.30pm. Events also include free art workshops with Laois Arthouse resident, Saidhbhín Gibson.

The Arts Office have arranged an **open mic competition** event at 3pm with music and the spoken word categories, for people aged 55 plus, on 31 May in the Dunamase Arts Centre. Competitors are urged to sign in from 2.30pm for the competition. Adjudication will be by eminent local judges. A lovely array of prizes have been sponsored by local shops and restaurants.

A concert by **Conspirito**, an ensemble group of graduates of Laois School of Music and performances by “**Lonrach**”, a contemporary Trad

Group under the directorship of Siobhan Buckley, will take place in a number of Care Settings during the month of May. A full list of Library events and events in the Dunamase Arts Centre will be available closer to the time.

You can find out all you need to know about **Bealtaine 2017** from the festival website www.bealtaine.com or locally on www.laois.ie. For more info please contact the Arts Office on 057 8664033/13 or email artsoff@laoiscoco.ie.



(Pic: @KaWe Images)

Tullamore Musical Society continues to make history

by Georgie O'Toole
and Vivienne Clarke

Tullamore Musical Society has established itself as one of the most consistent societies in the country producing shows year after year with stunning performances, casts, sets and production values.

This year's production – *Sweeney Todd* – did not disappoint with an amazingly professional effort, and we say ‘amazingly professional’ – because all the people involved are volunteers who give of their time and talent generously every winter. And what a year it has been for TMS. Last year's production of *The Witches of Eastwick* went on to win four nominations which included: Best Visual, Best Director (Paul Norton), Best Singer (Chris Coroon) and Best Ensemble for ‘*Dance with the Devil*’, choreographed by Graham Finnerty.

But at the ‘*Over the Rainbow*’ themed AIMS award ceremony in Killarney Tullamore representatives were to discover that they were one of five musical societies nominated for Best Overall Show – an accolade they went on the win. It was the first time in the society's 62 year history that the trophy and title was secured.

In recent years TMS has ventured outside the tried and trusted musicals so regularly brought to the stage (with great success and support) by amateur musical

societies. In 2011 they staged *Hot Mikado* which garnered a Best Comedienne AIMS award for cast member Karen Martin. In 2015 Chris Coroon was nominated for Best Comedian for his role as Chad in *All Shook Up* and then there were the four nominations for *The Witches of Eastwick* in 2016.

No doubt there will be a few names on the award nominations list this year for *Sweeney Todd* particularly for the stage setting and special effects.

Killoe Group takes on the one-act circuit

Well known in Longford for their ambitious productions and talented casts, Cilleo Yew Tree Players took on a new challenge last winter - performing on the All-Ireland one act circuit.

A fixture in the local drama scene since the late 1980s, the group has a membership of approximately thirty, from school age upwards.

“Usually once a year, we would normally do a full length play in March or April,” explained group Chairperson and Director of their one-act offering *‘Brenton vs Brenton’*, Damien Bennett.

“We had talked about going on the one-act circuit for a long, long time, so we applied for as many festivals as we could.”

Giving the reason for their show selection, Damien revealed; “We had done farce before in the group, so it seemed suitable to do it.”

A cast of six also meant that more people got to take in the experience of the circuit.

The group learned a lot from their first foray into the competition, Damien admitted. With an extensive set, and a large cast, the experience was often a difficult one, but one which they greatly enjoyed, nonetheless.

They had remarkable success at the festivals too. They performed at five festivals, earning second and third place in Cavan and Manorhamilton, respectively for the American spoof, which is set in an advertising agency in Chicago.

Paul McCarthy, meanwhile, was awarded ‘Best Actor’ in Carrigallen, and received numerous

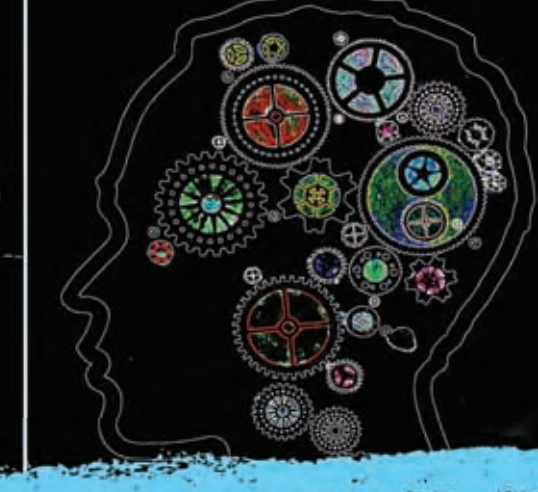
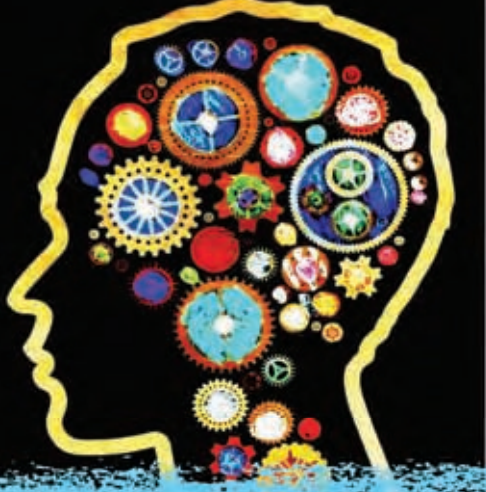
nominations. Sharon Finneran was nominated for ‘Best Actress’, while the rest of the cast, including Damien himself, Mary Mahon, Mick Dunne and Carmel Kennedy put on a memorable performance. Damien was also quick to praise the crew for their invaluable input.

“Without them we wouldn’t have been able to do what we did.

“We’ll absolutely try again,” Damien continued. “The overall consensus was that it was a very enjoyable and very worthwhile experience.”

Attention now turns to the group’s 2017 production, *‘Belfry’*, which will take to the stage in the first week of April, directed by Micky Kenny.





Anam Beo

A Panoramic Look

by Ciara Kelly

“Human identity is neither static nor singular: it is multiple and constantly evolving. The tools that enable us to construct who we are – how we know ourselves and how we are known by others – are selected from both our past and our present.”
Anne J Kershen 2010

Offaly's Arts in Health Organisation Anam Beo has been providing a creative programme to participants in care settings throughout the county for over a decade. In 2016 the '100 Years, 100 Faces' exhibition marked the centenary year in a unique collaboration between respective projects by Anam Beo's facilitators and participants, which fittingly involved themes surrounding reflection and memory. A retrospective milestone, the current year moves even more towards a climate of forward thinking with regards to health and wellbeing in the region.

Looking forward, Anam Beo will provide a collaborative and participatory pilot project in the Midland Regional Hospital, Tullamore made up of art sessions of group and individual artwork as well as one collaborative piece by the facilitating artists. Themes centre on contemporary culture and the digital age. The recent completion of the Scott Building on the grounds of the hospital is an important feature of progress.

The Scott Building is a four storey protected structure designed by the renowned Irish architect, Michael Scott in 1938. Originally it opened as Tullamore General Hospital and served the county and surrounding areas until the new hospital opened in 2007. Shortly afterwards work began on the refurbishment of the old limestone building which became occupied in late 2016. A varied range of services operate in the premises. Aesthetically it is described by *Archiseek* as “faced with traditional limestone masonry, [it] has a very strong horizontal linearity and glazed stairwell that show a Dutch Modernist influence in the massing and the use of a round bay in the centre of the main block. The main block is strongly symmetrical, showing the traditional training of the architects, but the building is entered from one end allowing an asymmetrical end elevation in the International Style. The ground floor elevations are dominated by a range of round headed windows. This unconventional use of materials with the massing treatment of International Modernism

shows Scott's interest in the use of materials for decorative purposes.”

There are plans to hold a one day seminar this summer in the Midlands Regional Hospital, Tullamore, curated by Ann Lawlor. The independent seminar will focus on relationships in healthcare settings, including those in various hospital departments, patients, visitors and the wider community. Its aims are to explore the role of the artist in these settings, the role and function of art in wellbeing as well as provide networking opportunities for attendees to explore future creative collaborations and partnerships. Coinciding with the seminar, it is hoped that Anam Beo will launch artwork for the hospital's departments along with contributing to the dialogue.

Supported by Offaly County Council and the Dublin Mid Leinster HSE. To find out more please visit www.anambeo.wordpress.com.

Easter Art Camps

presented by Laois Arts Office

Looking for some creative fun for children and young people over the Easter break? Places are filling up fast.

Arts and Craft for ages 6-9 years. Artist, Wendy Wright will host fun, creative arts and craft workshops. Imagination, colour and texture will all play their part as the participants get to explore the themes of Easter and Spring and create their own imaginative pieces. Workshops take place in the Laois Arthouse, Stradbally on Tuesday 18 and Wednesday 19 April. Fee: €5 per 2 hour workshop running 11-1 and 2-4. Booking essential as spaces are limited. T: 057 8664033 or email artsoff@laoiscoco.ie

Mirjana Rendulic. It is a taster for the Youth Theatre Group which will be established in Mountrath this year.

Over the month of July the Laois Summer Arts Programme will run a series of workshops for children and young people over three days in venues around County Laois. Arts, Craft, Pottery, will be included. To register your interest in all of the above contact: E: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie or call 057 866 4033/13.

A three day Drama Camp for teenagers will take place in Mountrath. It will be led by





LONGFORD LIVE AND LOCAL

Set up to try and combat a lack of musical activity in the county, Longford Live and Local held its inaugural event last October.

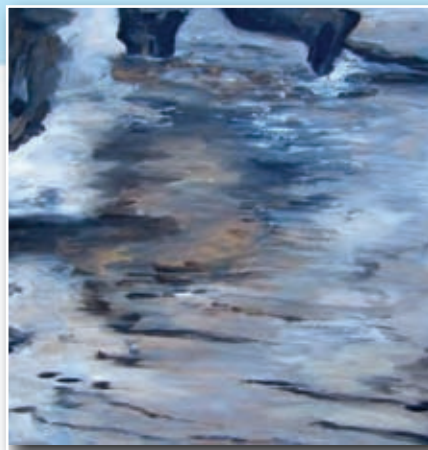
Organised by Longford musician and producer Paul Gurney, the first evening featured a range of solo artists across all genres. The event sold out and such was its success, that an impromptu second concert was held shortly before Christmas. "It was a great night," Paul said of their first outing. "I wasn't expecting that reaction. I was very apprehensive and very nervous about it."

"I had no idea how it was going to go, you know!"

"But I was thrilled with the reaction, that's why we went straight in with a follow up to try and keep that energy alive." The third event in the series took place in February, featuring local bands, while other genres and themed nights are also in the pipeline. Another development to the exciting endeavour came when Longford Arts Office got on board, with Longford Live and Local Sessions coming on-stream. "We're going to try and record it," Paul explained. "We're going to do a social media release."

The first wave of sessions will see ten acts record with Paul in Real World Studios, with videos being made to accompany the performances. It's hoped that these videos will also show off Longford in a positive light. Longford County Arts Officer, Fergus Kennedy, is also excited by the prospect of the upcoming project. "Part of the remit of the Arts Office is to generate an audience for the arts," he pointed out. "While there is a tremendous amount of talent and activity of various genres in Longford, it appears to be under the radar."

Admitting that he was "bowled over" by the debut event, Fergus added that the recordings would help to show off the depth of variety and quality of musicians and singers in Longford and the surrounding areas. When asked about possible future developments to the programme, meanwhile, Paul simply smiled and said, "Anything is possible, and that's the great thing about it!"



Rosemarie Langtry

As the very real and devastating toll of flooding has made its presence felt in Westmeath in recent years, artists are as always among the first to give expression to the hardship and challenges of these events

Installation, paint and encaustic are combined in an exhibition entitled 'Submerged' to reflect the serious impact of severe flooding in and around Athlone in January 2016. Artist Rosemarie Langtry's evocative representation of the devastation caused by the flood water forms a thought provoking exhibition which was launched by Mayor of Athlone, John Dolan at the Dean Crowe Theatre in Spring of 2017.

The artwork was subsequently displayed in the Ballinasloe Library's new Church Gallery before heading to The Atrium in Mullingar for a show in early May.

The subtle hues and delicate wax on sculptured sandbags denotes the fragility of swathes of water bursting from the banks of the River Shannon and swamping the townlands of Athlone. Described by Langtry as the "beauty within the beast" she has portrayed watery scenes capturing the poignancy and turmoil of flood water on the plains of Athlone and surrounding areas.

Rosemarie, who comes from Ballinahown, has a spontaneous approach to her work and enjoyed the challenge of depicting the serious effects nature can have on our landscape. The exhibition was kindly supported by Westmeath County Council.

Visiting the exhibition in the Dean Crowe Theatre, local resident and Chairperson of Athlone Community Radio, Ursula Ledwith commented "It is well worth a visit, Rosemarie has definitely captured the effects of flood water in the area when so many people and properties were caught up in this historic event in the town". With an artistic and creative approach Langtry's work encapsulates the haunting and silent nature of flooding in a community."

Ursula's highlight from the exhibition was an installation entitled "Contained" where the delicate portrayal of miniature sandbags are in stark contrast to the large, clumsy and soggy ones in real life.



SUMMER PAINTING

Programme for Adults in the Laois Arthouse, 7, 8, 9 June 2017

"Painting and Drawing in Light, Mood and Movement" is the title of the forthcoming Summer Art programme for adults in the Laois Arthouse. It will be directed by acclaimed painter John Keating. It takes place on 7 - 9 June from 11.00am to 4.00pm daily and the cost is €80 per person.

Over the three days the participants will focus on a number of areas including Still Life - observational line, texture, form and composition in various techniques; The Figure - drawing and painting the figure through gesture, movement and static form; A Sense of Perspective - developing painting or drawing with the emphasis on spatial dimensionality and creating the illusion of space through light, tone and depth.

Participants are requested to bring a selection of the following materials; compressed charcoal, graphite, 2B-6B pencils, black, brown and white Conté crayons, putty rubber, oils, acrylic or watercolours, sketch pad, oil panel, canvas and papers.

Born in Tipperary in 1953, John Keating studied at the Crawford College of Art, Cork, Trinity College, Dublin, Loughborough University, Leicestershire and The Arts Student League of New York, which he attended on a scholarship. Keating has exhibited nationally and internationally including exhibitions in the U.S.A., Italy, Spain, Greece, Monaco and China. His work is included in private and public collections in Ireland, the U.S.A., Australia, Italy, Greece and England. Keating has guest lectured and tutored on the drawing studies course at the National Gallery of Ireland, National College of Art and Design, Dublin Institute of Technology

Documentation of the programme will be done by Lisa Fingleton. This project is curated by Muireann Ní Chonaill, Arts Officer. This project is funded by the percent for Art Scheme and Laois County Council.

For more info:
T 057 8664033 • E: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie

The Laois Arthouse Gallery, Stradbally, Co. Laois presents:

“Winter Trees from the Artist’s Garden”

An exhibition of drawings by Mary Lee Murphy

‘Winter Trees from the Artist’s Garden’ is a vibrant, unique collection of pencil drawings that were made outdoors over the winter months, of trees in the artist’s garden. The exhibition was officially launched on Saturday 11 March by Lord and Countess Rosse of Birr Castle, Co Offaly.

Mary Lee Murphy is an artist based in the Sligo countryside but originally from Waterford. She typically works through the medium of wax resist and dye, transcending the traditional techniques of Batik, to create original and enduring contemporary pieces. She always works directly from the landscape, in particular Connemara, drawing rocks, sea, trees, lichens and plants. From these detailed drawings evolve larger works using the process of wax resist and dye on canvas, cottons and silks with an emphasis on saturated colour, pattern and design processes, capturing her emotional response to the places where she works. While her work normally takes her to the remote rocky shores of Connemara, this exhibition of work was done in the artist’s garden.

“Trees are at their most revealing in winter and that’s when, through drawing, I re-acquaint myself with the trees in my garden. Beech, ash, silver birch, hawthorn, cherry and apple, all unique, each with its own signature and individual personality but also sharing common characteristics.

“After the autumn winds I seize my chance to follow their contours, explore their branches and follow the lines of their growth. Trees have much in common with people, they grow in groups and families, they lean from the wind, they creak and they sigh. They celebrate together in the spring

and in the autumn. Words like robust, graceful and tender can be applied to trees and through the process of drawing them I begin to really see them from their scratchy extremities through to the intimacy and extraordinary detail of their bark. When I draw trees I realise that it is they that are drawing me, pulling me ever closer and gently into the stillness of their sheltering spaces.”

Mary’s work has been widely acclaimed with thirteen solo shows to date and participation in numerous group, open submission, and invited exhibitions both at home in Ireland and abroad. Her work is in many public and private collections. The artist and her work also featured in a short documentary produced by TG4.

The exhibition runs from Saturday 11 March to Thursday 13 April 2017.

More information on Mary’s work is available at www.maryleemurphy.com

Opening times:

Tues and Thurs: 1pm-5pm & 5.30pm-8pm,

Sat: 10am-1pm (except on Bank Holidays)

(entry through library)

Wed and Fri: 1pm-4pm

(entry through Laois Arthouse)

For more details contact:

T: 057 8664033

E: artsoff@laoiscoco.ie

Coming in May:

Doors of Stradbally Art Exhibition

The Stradbally branch of the Active Retirement Association (ARA) will launch their art exhibition entitled ‘Doors of Stradbally’ on Saturday 6th May at 1.30pm. The exhibition will be officially launched by Anna May McHugh, the Chief of the National Ploughing Association. The exhibition will include twelve original paintings, each depicting a different historic doorway in the town. The original idea captured the imagination of the group and its enthusiastic artists. All paintings will be for sale with proceeds going back into the ARA. The Stradbally ARA has been established for three years and currently has twenty members. It is an open and inclusive organisation whose aim is to support and empower retired and semi-retired individuals in their community through a wide range of activities.

In July: The Meeting

‘The Meeting’, a group show co-curated with County Laois Arts Officer Muireann Ní Chonaill. Muireann Ní Chonaill and Olivier Cornet met for the first time at the Speed Curating event arranged annually by Visual Artists Ireland as part of their artists’ Get Together at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA). Through working side-by-side in the chapel at IMMA, meeting artists at this event, the idea for the joint exhibition was born. From the artists they met last year, Olivier invited David Fox and Vicky Smith and Muireann invited Darina Meagher and Aileen Hamilton to participate in this joint exhibition. The exhibition will open in the Laois Arthouse, Stradbally, Co Laois, on Saturday 1 July 2017. It will then travel to the Olivier Cornet Gallery, 3 Great Denmark Street, Dublin 1, for the month of August.

Foundation/Female by Ciara Kelly

Offaly born playwright and theatre-maker Christiane O’Mahony is working on a new play about female identity in the faithful county.

The play is a project which forms part of *Foundation Arts*, a four-part creative programme based in Tullamore. *Foundation Arts* engages professional artists, community groups and the general public in hands-on workshops with a view to holding a final presentation/performance. Two of these projects were completed late last year including ‘Choreosculptures’ by noted choreographer Fergus Byrne and also a youth-based visual arts exhibition called ‘Cnoc Déig’ by Sarah McDowell. Christiane’s project invited Offaly women to come to a free workshop on the eve of International Women’s Day in Tullamore Community Arts Centre. As a means to explore notions around feminine identity participants were asked to ponder some simple questions: “Are you a woman? Would you like to talk a bit about you whilst drinking tea? Do you have an object that is meaningful to you, an object that has a story for you? Then we would really, really like to hear from you. You do not necessarily have to be experienced in theatre, but an interest will help.”

The workshop introduced a segment of Christiane’s new play and participants were encouraged to delve deeper into the script and explore the thematic content in a comedic, honest and provocative way. As is part of the aim of *Foundation* participants were provided with an opportunity to work alongside an experienced playwright and theatre professional whilst enabling Christiane’s own creative process. From this point the play will be further developed and be presented as a performance piece at a later stage.

Christiane has worked as an actor, comedian, writer and musician both nationally and internationally. She is co-founder of ‘For the Birds Company’ which toured the highly successful centenary-based play ‘Sisters of the Rising’ around Ireland in 2016. Christiane, quite literally has many strings to her bow including being an accomplished harpist and mezzo soprano singer as well as experience in stand-up comedy and theatre, she has been described as



‘funny, sharp, original’ (Irish Times), “the best kept secret on Irish comedy scene” (Irish Independent).

This workshop is being facilitated under the *Foundation Arts Projects* in association with Offaly County Council Arts Office and is co-ordinated by Brendan Fox.

To find out more about the project or on how to get involved visit the Facebook page www.facebook.com/foundationartsfestival or for future projects see www.offaly.ie/arts

Animating Westmeath:

With a new Animation course available in AIT, the Luan Gallery set to showcase visual artists who work in animation in an exciting Autumn exhibition, and an interview with animator Charles Badiller, Westmeath is carving out its space in animation practice, learning and development.

Arts Officer Miriam Mulrennan in dialogue with Westmeath based animator Charles Badiller for Midlands Arts and Culture Magazine.

Charles, can you give us some background on how and why you became an animator?

When I was about to finish high school, I was hesitating between becoming a doctor, or a Comic-book artist. I quickly understood that I would have more fun with the latter and entered a school in the west of France. Throughout the courses, I realized I would be even more interested in animation, rather than comic book, as I was developing a big love for movement. Luckily, this same school had both disciplines, and I was able to make up my mind just before choosing a specialization. But even after graduating, I felt I needed more preparation, so I applied for the animation school Les Gobelins, in Paris, and got it on the second attempt. This school allowed me to grow as an artist, but also to develop a solid network and get amazing coverage. I had the chance to be an intern at the Walt Disney Animation Studios in Burbank, CA, during my 2nd year, and got my first job after graduation in ROYGBIV, Los Angeles, CA, as well.

What do you think are the characteristics/traits of animators... and can they be 'learned'?

You have to be very, very, patient to be an animator. Animation is a very long process, commonly having to draw 8 to 12 images per second of footage. Then, for the same reason, you have to be quite organized. Some are crazy about control, which is great and

especially for CGI (3D animation), and other more about instinct and feel. And finally, you have to be good at observing things around you. Anything, and everything is a source of knowledge for an animator. How do people move, when angry, when sad, alone or in a group, how do the leaves of a tree fall from its branches, what does the wind do to your clothes, etc. These daily life events are a goldmine for an animator.

Can you tell us a bit about the kinds of courses and the types of jobs available within the animation sector?

Animation is a pretty broad industry. The animation school I attended focused on as many aspects as it could, to give us all the weapons to create a full animation piece on our own, but also to give everyone the opportunity to know their strengths and weaknesses, and/or tastes, and work on it. It covered script writing, storyboarding, character design, backgrounds, animation, to compositing and finally editing. And I will only count sub categories for the Animation section as it's the one I'm specialized in. You have, in 2D animation (as opposed to CGI, or stop motion), the animator, inbetween artist, clean-up artist, and FX animator. Before, and it's still the case in some studios, those 4 disciplines were separated, but nowadays, a lot of animators do them all depending on their contract. However, animation is all about Storytelling, but most of all teamwork. You can do a movie on your own, but it's very hard to be good at every step of its creation. That's why you have so many people on the credits of any animated piece outside of student shorts.

Steven Spielberg said"luckily with animation, fantasy is your friend", what are your thoughts on this? Are there things that animation bring to the viewer that live action simply cannot?

I think I can merge those two questions together. Because I think animation can bring whatever it wants, while live action can't. Today, every live action movie has animation in it. CGI, obviously - a lot isn't real at all in movies. Technology brings so many possibilities. For 2D animation, I think the only limitation is the animator's talent to bring complicated designs (or even simple) to life, because as I said, you have to redraw a character up to 12 (or even 24 times in extreme cases) per second. I guess what I am saying is that with animation you can do whatever you want, even completely unrealistic things, as long as you make them believable. And when something moves, or is shown - believably, then you forget it's an animated piece and you jump into the story. We see life every day around us, our eyes know what looks correct. So, naturally, if we see a character that doesn't move quite normally, we will feel there is something wrong, even if we aren't able to identify why. The sensation is still there. So yes, I think animation can bring a lot that live action couldn't, but it's also trickier depending on what you want to present.

Charles Badiller is a 27 year old animator based in Mullingar, working as a free-lancer for different studios across the world, including PowerHouse in Texas and Sun Creature in Copenhagen.



AIT New Animation and Illustration Course Brings Another Dimension to Animation Activity In Westmeath

Great news for students living in the wider midland region who wish to study animation. Athlone Institute of Technology launched its BA Honours Degree course in Animation and Illustration in September 2016. The first intake of students are now well into the first year of what is a 4-year course. Athlone Institute of Technology already has well-established and highly reputable degree and masters courses in Graphic Design and the new animation and illustration course is part of the Institute's plan to expand the Design Department at the college.

Animation in Ireland is a growing industry with a growing reputation internationally. Cartoon Saloon who made the Oscar nominated 'Song of the Sea' is in the process of completing a new animated movie titled 'The Breadwinner'. Co-produced by Angelina Jolie it is due for release in the autumn of 2017. There are over 1,600 people working in the animation industry in Ireland and the numbers are growing. The government has recognised animation as an industry to be promoted alongside film at both at home and abroad.



Sites of Tension: Art and Ecology Seminar

by Lisa Fingleton

On 19 November 2016, artists, ecologists and activists converged at Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise, for the 'Sites of Tension' seminar. The seminar was organised to coincide with Monica de Bath's solo exhibition 'Plot/Ceapach', curated by Denise Reddy.

Each of de Bath's paintings reflects a committed, durational practice on industrially excavated Bord na Móna peatlands and other related sites of tension. "I thought, painted and conversed with this fragile landscape. Painting acted as a meditative space from which to look at things differently".

Weaving together aesthetic, organic and political strands, the seminar focused on the role of artists, ecologists and communities in creating a sustainable future. Speakers articulated new visions for socially-engaged practices in the areas of ecology and art. Local and global land-use and the complex sites of tension between nature and humans were discussed at length.

Referencing Edward Said, de Bath stresses the importance of paying "attention to more than one voice, particularly voices other than the dominant one". This proved to be a recurring theme throughout the day, with many speakers referring to the 'tacit knowledge' of farmers and indigenous communities. Artist Deirdre O'Mahony described her project 'X-PO' (a re-appropriated old post

office in the Burren) as an "in-between space for dissenting propositions".

Chris Uys from the Abbeyleix Bog Project, proposed a focus on ecological, as opposed to 'egological', approaches to land use. His quote from American writer and ecologist Aldo Leopold resonated with the audience: "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect". The conversation seemed especially timely in the current era, when the earth's resources are subject to escalating privatisation.

Gareth Kennedy offered insights into his project *Post Colony* (2014), which took place in Killarney National Park, outlining the potential for artists to manifest a "real, engaged, embedded and sustained third space". He conveyed his strategy for building a community of interests, identifying stakeholders and developing clear artistic outcomes.

I spoke about my project 'The 30 Day Food Challenge' where I ate only locally produced food

for a month. This project highlighted in a tangible way, our reliance on imported foods and on sugar in particular.

As the seminar, chaired by Paddy Woodworth, drew to a close, there was a palpable desire to extend these discussions and activities. As with any thought-provoking debate, we were left with a number of questions: Where do we situate ourselves in times of controversy? How can we imagine solutions and act in solidarity with those who have less power in the globalised economy?

The idea of a touring exhibition is evolving as a follow up to the seminar. Interested galleries/communities can contact: monicadebath@eircom.net or denisreddy01@gmail.com

The seminar was supported by Dunamais Arts Centre, VAI, Laois and Kildare Arts Offices and Bord na Móna.

Lisa Fingleton is an artist, filmmaker and writer originally from Laois. www.lisafingleton.com



Patricia GIBNEY



Mullingar writer Patricia Gibney publishes 'The Missing Ones', the first of an enviable four-book deal by the debut crime author. Midlands Arts and Culture finds out more...

A gripping, page-turning serial killer thriller, guaranteed to keep you reading late into the night.

Mullingar born Patricia Gibney's debut novel, *The Missing Ones*, is published this month on Amazon by UK publishers Bookouture. Patricia's road to publication has been an exciting rollercoaster. In January 2016 literary agent, Ger Nichol of The Book Bureau, signed up to represent Patricia. In May, Bookouture Publishers, London, expressed an interest in a series of books featuring Lottie Parker. Then in July 2016, Patricia signed a four-book deal with Bookouture.

Talking about the writing process, Patricia says that writing the first book was the easiest part even though it took her five years (on and off) to write *The Missing Ones*. Since then she's come to appreciate that the most crucial part of writing is the editing process and the many stages through which a novel must go before it is ready to meet the reader.

Patricia says: "The most difficult part for me personally is that while I'm writing a new novel, immersing myself in new plot lines, I have to simultaneously edit the previous book. But I love writing. I have created a core set of characters that will feature in all the novels plus each book introduces new characters – villains, victims and the virtuous. New scenery, new plots and sub plots. I love the creative part. The really hard part is to keep this going while being thrust back into the previous

book to edit. It's not easy. It takes a lot of discipline. And with tight turnaround deadlines, it takes a lot of concentration and focus.

"I find it extremely difficult to hold my concentration for long periods of time. This goes back almost eight years to 2009 when I lost my husband Aidan to cancer. My whole world turned upside down and I think part of me was lost forever with his death. But my three children, friends and family have been exceptional. As a coping mechanism I wrote and illustrated my little kiddie's book, *Spring Sprong Sally*, which I self-published. Then I started writing the novel which eventually turned into *The Missing Ones*." It took her five years to complete and now she has six-month deadlines for each of the remaining three books.

The Missing Ones is published in March 2017 as an e-book. It will also be available as an audio book and print on demand.

Patricia says she finds it hard to get excited about the publication of *The Missing Ones*, and she is actually quite terrified. "Writing is a lonely business. Cliché but it's true. You hide yourself away in this imaginary world you've created, never believing for a minute that someday people might be reading it. And when your dream comes true, it is a scary place to be."

Writing crime novels seemed like a logical road for Patricia as that's the genre she loves to read.

Regarding the police procedures, she says she had to take huge liberties to allow the story to flow and maintain pace. "I make things up, after all, it is fiction."

What is *The Missing Ones* about?

"The hole they dug was not deep. A white flour bag encased the little body. Three small faces watched from the window, eyes black with terror. The child in the middle spoke without turning his head. 'I wonder which one of us will be next?'"

When a woman's body is discovered in a cathedral and hours later a man is found hanging from a tree outside his home, Detective Inspector Lottie Parker is called in to lead the investigation. Both bodies have the same distinctive tattoo clumsily inscribed on their legs. It's clear there is a connection, but what is it? The trail leads Lottie to St Angela's, a former children's home, with a dark connection to her own family history. Suddenly the case just got personal. As Lottie begins to link the current victims to unsolved murders decades old, two teenage boys go missing. She must close in on the killer before they strike again, but in doing so is she putting her own children in terrifying danger? Lottie is about to come face to face with a twisted soul who has a *very* warped idea of justice.

It is intended that at least two more books in the series will be published later in 2017.



Music Generation Laois: Young Harpists to Attend Edinburgh Harp Festival

Thirteen young harpists from Music Generation Laois will attend this year's Edinburgh Harp Festival from the 31 March to the 5 April. Edinburgh Harp Festival is internationally renowned for its vast programme of workshops and concerts, and attracts musicians from all over the world. Members of the Music Generation Laois Harp Ensembles will attend this year's Festival with their Tutor Siobhan Buckley.

Music Generation Laois currently has 116 harp students and two harp ensembles, many of whom attend classes in their local primary schools. The Music Generation Laois senior harp ensemble collaborated with Scottish Harpist Catriona McKay in 2016 to create a new suite of music for harp ensemble, entitled 'Rising of the Harps' and most recently this group performed as part of 'Avoca: A Celtic Journey,' a 30th birthday concert for Music Network, with music for large-scale harp ensemble by Phillip Martin conducted by David Brophy. Music Generation Laois will host their second annual Tionól for Harps and Pipes from the 3-5 November 2017, featuring workshops and performances from many well-known harpists and pipers.

For more information on the Music Generation Laois harp programme, contact Music Generation Laois on musicgenerationlaois@laoiscoco.ie, 057 8664176 or see musicgenerationlaois.ie

Music Generation Laois is a performance music education programme which provides access to high quality performance music education at subsidised costs to children and young people in their own area. It is part of Music Generation, Ireland's national music education programme, co-funded nationally by U2, The Ireland Funds and The Department of Education and Skills, and locally by Laois County Council (lead partner), Laois-Offaly ETB and Laois Partnership Company.



Building Creative COMMUNITIES



Laois County Council welcomes major creativity initiative

Enabling creativity in every community is a core pillar of the Creative Ireland Programme, an ambitious five-year initiative, from 2017 to 2022, which will place our strongest assets – our culture and creative communities – at the centre of public policy.

In 2016, Laois County Council demonstrated their unique capacity to activate and support community engagement and participation in marking the Centenary year through a wide range of arts, culture and heritage initiatives.

Creative Ireland aims to build on this success by leading on the development of a dedicated Culture and Creativity plan for Laois, based on the premise that participation in cultural activity drives personal and collective creativity, with significant implications for individual and societal well-being. 2017 will see a special focus on children and young people with the specific objective of fast-tracking the Charter for Arts in Education, which will significantly increase access and participation for children in high quality arts and culture experiences.

A network of highly experienced arts officers, heritage officers and librarians has been set up across all 31 local authorities to lead on each county's Creative Ireland Programme and a series of public meetings will be held over the next four weeks to share ideas, develop collaborations and explore opportunities for increased investment in local arts, culture and creative industries. Additional funding to support the initiative will be made available through the Creative Ireland Programme in 2017 with the potential for further investment over the next four years. Local Authority Arts Officer **Muireann Ní Chonaill** has been appointed Creative Ireland co-ordinator for Laois.

In addition, all the agencies of Government, including national cultural institutions, state agencies, Government Departments, organisations, individuals

and communities will be activated to embed creativity across all aspects of their work – and use that creative potential to foster collective well-being and social cohesion.

Laois County Council and the Creative Ireland national team will host an open meeting on **Monday 3 April at 6.30pm at the Killeslin Hotel, Portlaoise** to share details about the Programme and to explore opportunities to increase access, engagement and collaboration in the local arts and creative industries in Laois. A family-focused free event will take place entitled “Crinniú na Cásca” at the Dunamais Arts Centre, Portlaoise on Easter Monday 17 April at 3pm, showcasing dance, drama, and music with special guest musician John Spillane. Full details of the Creative Ireland Programme are available at creativeireland.ie

Magical Moments Captured in Quaid Quality

by Anthony Sullivan

It's probably true to say that most people consider the 'star' names of the arts, culture, and entertainment to be those upon whom the spotlight shines. After all, it's those who take to the stage, who stand behind a mic, sit at or strap on their instrument of choice, or lay their carefully chosen and formulated words and images upon page or canvas, that we see in our newspapers or on our screens when most arts, cultural, or entertainment events and occasions are reported on.

But, here's the thing: we know as much as we do about those who tend to appear most often in front of the camera, purely because of those who do their best work, and put their undoubted talents to use, behind the camera. One such gentleman, is Offaly photographer Farrell Quaid.

Since first taking an interest in photography some five years ago, the man from Blueball, just outside Tullamore, has immersed himself in what initially began as a hobby. Since then, however, photography has transformed itself into a passion, and is now well on its way to becoming Farrell's profession. “I try to look out for the kind of moments that might otherwise go unnoticed, or slip past without people being aware of them. Most of the time those moments come and go in the blink of an eye, or even faster, but what I find is that those moments, even if they're virtually unseen to the naked eye at the time, can really capture the true essence of whatever might have been happening. And often times, too, something can be sitting there right in

front of most people, and just go unnoticed. So I try to see what no-one else might, and in a way they might not as well.”

Somewhat unusually for most photographers, Farrell has tried his hand (and eye!) in various different forms of the medium, from working with models (including Elsa Henshaw, who has international modelling experience, and Margaret Bolton, Lady of Ireland contest 2016 winner), to nature, sports events, and most recently, the music business. In fact, Farrell has become a regular sight at some of the biggest music occasions in the midlands over the last year, skillfully capturing country music stars such as Mike Denver, Olivia Douglas, Robert Mizzell, Pete Kennedy and more 'live' on stage at concerts and award shows. In late 2016 Farrell also worked with the band ROSLYN on their new album, with a shot of his eventually emerging as the band's choice for their album cover.

“I enjoy the 'live' situations, whether it's sporting or music”, reveals Farrell. “They offer a different type of challenge, because what's happening is out of your control so you have to be alive to the possibility of every opportunity that might present itself, because they pass so quickly. So there's almost an element of thinking ahead, and reading what's in front of you, and seeing in your mind what's likely to come next so that when it does, if it does, you're ready.”

The music scene is clearly one Farrell enjoys and he intends to continue working there should opportunities to do so keep coming his way. And given the quality of his work, that already seems like

a foregone conclusion. But Farrell is always looking to the next challenge, too, and stepping out of his comfort-zone and into the unknown is what allows him to further develop his skills.

“Night-time photography is an area I've been experimenting with of late. It takes great patience to wait for the light and everything else to be just right for the shot you want. And even after waiting, the right moment might not come along. You never know. But when it does, the wait is always worth it.”

Farrell can be contacted at the following address: photographyquaid@gmail.com





THE DERRAVARAGH MUSIC ASSOCIATION CELEBRATES ITS 30TH BIRTHDAY

by Valerie Packenham

On October 14th this year, the Derravaragh Music Society or DMA will be celebrating its birthday with the wonderful pianist Andre Zolinsky playing Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev at Tullynally Castle, Castlepollard in Co. Westmeath. This will be the 167th concert the DMA has sponsored in the Great Hall of the castle and it will now be almost 30 years since the DMA first began to bring superb classical musicians to play in this beautiful corner of North Westmeath.

Few people may now remember how this remarkable music society came into existence. It all began on a grey October day in 1987, when our rector, the Reverend Norman Ruddock had called in for tea on a walk from the rectory half a mile away across the fields. Gloomily contemplating the rain outside and the dark winter months that lay ahead, I asked what could he think of to cheer us all up – and put to use this huge grey dinosaur of a house.

An immediate gleam came into his eye – and three days later, he was back with a plan. He would arrange a series of concerts in the Great Hall, which he had already spotted as having wonderful acoustics for music. His brother John Ruddock was already bringing over a series of talented young musicians from England and Europe to play in Dublin and other venues in Ireland. And he would set up a committee of local volunteers to help. So we had our first meeting and the DMA was born (we chose a romantic name so it didn't sound too parochial). Two months later we had our first concert, played by the Panocha Quartet. Norman had somehow procured staging and 150 red stacking chairs – all officially for the parochial hall next door. It all went swimmingly and there was soon an annual programme of winter concerts in place.

Most of our early performers came from Eastern Europe, arranged by John Ruddock who went there regularly in search of talent even before the Iron Curtain fell. Some of them have since become hugely famous. The group I remember most vividly was the nine strong Budapest Wind Ensemble. Their excitable leader had already gone through three wives and alarmed us late at night by demanding we

should bring him beautiful girls from Castlepollard. He also complained about the castle plumbing, having discovered a number of spiders in his bath.

Then sadly in 1995, Norman and Jean, his wonderful wife, left here to take over the church of St Iberius in Wexford which Norman soon filled with a further programme of musical events. But to our great good fortune, he had helped persuade David Taylor to become the new chairman of the DMA. David claims he had no idea what he had let himself in for, but with his wife Bridget – acting Treasurer – he has run it with brilliant success ever since. We also have a wonderful committee of local volunteers, most of them of equally long service, who contribute ideas and provide such essential services as drinks and coffee in the interval. Dawn Harmon, from Fore, four miles away, provides us with brilliant readable notes for our concert programmes. The DMA is very much a community effort and we are exceptionally lucky to have found such able people living nearby – and a chairman who can keep us all working happily in tandem. Thanks to his efforts – and to our loyal audiences and supporters, the DMA has been able to provide first class music for the past 30 years without public funding – no mean feat.

Which have been our most successful concerts to date? It would be invidious to choose. We have now had musicians from nearly every corner of the world, many of them becoming friends and returning to us several times over the years: the Trio di Parma and the Vogler String Quartet have played for us no fewer than six times, the Vienna Mozart Piano Trio four times and the Moscow Piano Trio, the Auer

String Quartet and the Scharoun Ensemble three times each. We have enjoyed dazzling solo concerts from the great Russian pianist, Nicolai Demidenko (thrice) and from Stefan Arnold from Vienna and Joanna McGregor from England, and from our own leading Irish pianists, John O'Connor, Finghin Collins and Hugh Tinney. We have had a full scale opera, Don Giovanni performed outside on the terrace (luckily it did not rain and Don Giovanni was able to descend to hell discreetly without our having to dig a hole in the lawn).

We have had drawing room opera and opera arias, we have had songs by Schubert and Thomas Moore and Haydn and Cole Porter. We have had brass quintets – and jazz ensembles. We have heard wonderful composers from the late 17th century until the present day. It has been a musical education for us all. Long may our enthusiastic audiences continue to enjoy it and fill the Great Hall. The hall was remodelled by my husband's great great grandfather, the 2nd Earl of Longford in the early 1800s. He was a passionate lover of music and a subscriber to Beethoven's earliest concertos. He still looks down on us from his portrait on the hall wall just beside his coat of arms – and, I feel sure, with posthumous approval.

Details of forthcoming concerts and ticket venues can be found on the DMA's own website: www.derravaraghmusic.ie or on the events page of www.tullynallycastle.ie. If you would like to support us further, please become a Friend of the Derravaragh Music Association by a donation – you will then receive advance notice of concerts by email and priority access to bookings.

International Artist Mark Garry's colourful homecoming to Athlone's Luan Gallery

Mullingar native and leading international contemporary artist Mark Garry is most closely identified with his thread drawings: fragile, painstakingly made installations built up from tightly spaced bands of coloured thread. Renowned for creating delicately considered site specific installations, they can virtually disappear into the background, only to burst into kaleidoscopic life when touched by the light.

Making a welcome homecoming to Westmeath with his exhibition 'An Afterwards' his work responds directly to the architecture and design of the Luan Gallery while reflecting on time spent visiting relatives in Athlone as a child.

In his spring 2017 Luan Gallery show, Garry says: "When approaching exhibition-making I try to make works that respond both to architectural space and a social situation. While there are consistent materials and apparatus employed in each exhibition, I respond to each situation with a new set of conceptual criteria." Gently nudging the viewer through the Luan Gallery, Garry's installation avoids easy definition, focusing on 'skill' and its role within the creative process.

His works combine visual, sensory and empathetic analogues, which create arrangements of elements that intersect the space and relate to the physical ergonomics of the space and each other. Garry uses

a range of natural and craft materials such as thread, beads, coloured paper, origami, plants and a variety of methodologies to dynamically transform these materials in such a way as to delicately intersect the space and leave open the possibility of imaginative responses to the visual, spatial and associative interactions created by the materials.

Garry has held exhibitions at museums and art venues in Europe, North America, Australia and Asia and was one of the artists who represented Ireland at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Most recently Mark has exhibited at the Serpentine Gallery, London; RHA, Dublin; Whitebox Gallery, New York; Galleria Civica di Modena, Italy and Dublin's Hugh Lane and Douglas Hyde Galleries. Garry's work is held in many private and public collections including The Arts Council of Ireland, the collection of Arthur and Carol Goldberg and The Foundation to Life, New York.

The Luan Gallery in Athlone delivers a broad contemporary art programme – including exhibitions by local, regional and international artists. Mark Garry fits all of these categories, and bringing 'An Afterwards' to Athlone was clearly a poignant milestone for the artist and his family.



Westmeath arts officer Miriam Mulrennan with John Joe Mulrennan at the launch of Mark Garry's Exhibition

Darina Meagher

Darina Meagher is the recipient of a one month residency at Arthouse, Stradbally, Co. Laois, awarded at the Dunamaise Arts Centre Annual Open Submissions Exhibition in November 2016. The theme of the exhibition was "Dog Days". The show was curated by Patricia Hurl and Thierry Rudin from Damer House in Roscrea.

Meagher submitted a painting entitled, "Hotel Room" to the competition. "I am really delighted to receive this award, for a variety of reasons, firstly, Thierry Rudin and Patricia Hurl, are two artists whom I greatly admire, they are doing such impressive work at Damer House. This endorsement from them and the Dunamaise Art Centre is a big vote of confidence in my work.

"To win a month's residency is like getting a gift of space and time, away from everyday commitments. It is a very exciting opportunity, I am really looking forward to just working, uninterrupted for the whole month of July."

With an honours degree in design and an MA in Visual Communication, from the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, Meagher spent many years working in the area of design and visual communication. A deep interest in the hand-made and the imperfections in the artistic process led her to contemporary painting.

Awarded a BA (Hons.) in Visual Arts Practice at the Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in 2011, she completed a Masters in Fine Art Painting at the NCAD, Dublin in 2014. Winner of the Peter O'Kane Solo Exhibition award at the RDS Student Award 2011, Meagher has also completed a three month studio residency at the RHA in 2015 and has exhibited extensively.

Meagher's work is an on-going investigation. Using varying sources and often responding to the environment in which she finds herself, she searches for answers. Through the medium of paint and the simple act of mark-making she explores new ways of seeing and experiencing the world. Meagher is particularly interested in contemporary society and its evolution.

The award is co-funded by the Laois Arts Office and the Dunamaise Arts Centre.



TO BE A PAMPHLETEER

by Rosalind Fanning • Irish translation by Ailbhe Curran

A cherished idea is born: to create a newsletter on the Arts and Irish in Birr. To my great delight a letter from Offaly Arts Office has just arrived to let me know that my application under the Arts Act Grant 2017 has been successful! Support funds, primarily for the design of a template, in conjunction with a professional graphics designer, will enable the project's beginning into fruition. The pamphlet/paimfléad will be a collaboration between Biorra le Gaeilge and myself as artist/designer and editor.

Paimfléad Ealaíon agus Gaeilge – i mBiorra, will begin happily and unambitiously as a double-sided A4-sized, folded leaflet, with text and illustrations. In English, it will most likely have the main banner-title name of 'The Yawper - A Pamphlet on The Arts & Irish - Birr'. Free to the public – the local community, visitors and tourists, it will be available to readers in various locations, primarily displayed in a specially designed unit on the walls of willing cafés. A prototype of the little unit, 'Arts Connect', was made for me last year.

In part, the seasonal pamphlet will simply aid in generally promoting the art happenings and featuring individual artists of Birr but also connecting people with the Irish language events,

for people in town or who are new visitors to Birr. With a column of practical but brief listings and contact details, it will have both a factual and somewhat quirky mix of content. Whimsical elements; some ramblings; a little gritty from time-to-time; historical and contemporary. Mostly all short, shorter and very short, the longest features will be around 600 words, down through 300, 200 and 150 word items. To be written by working artists in all disciplines and fluent Irish speakers all mostly local, guest contributors will be approached occasionally: the Irish and the English languages mixing with unselfconscious ease. As an occasional writer and artist, my own jottings and scribbles may well be regular anchors, if not out of some necessity!

Ever since reading the word, I've always wanted to be a 'pamphleteer'!

Proclaiming, off-centre of the standard paths, which is what much within the arts is, and does. What better creative combination than the elevating effects of the arts in our lives, and Irish spoken and written as an adapted, living language and the elation in hearing it around us.

Sin é

My very grateful thanks to Offaly Arts Office; to the contributors so far, and of course Ailbhe for her patience in kindly doing translations.

CHUN A BHEITH I MO 'PAMFLÉADAÍ'

Le Rosalind Fanning & Ailbhe Curran (aistriúchán)

Tháinig mé ar smaoineamh lá - chun nuachtlitir a chumadh ar na hEalaíona agus an Ghaeilge i mBiorra. Le tacaíocht ón Oifig Ealaíon Uíbh Fháilí, bhí mé in ann mo smaoineamh a chur i gcrích. Beidh an paimfléad mar chomhoibriú idir Biorra le Gaeilge agus mé féin mar ealaíontóir/dearthóir agus eagarthóir.

Beidh an Paimfléad Ealaíon agus Gaeilge (Biorra) i bhfoirm leathanach A4 (cúl le cúl agus fillte) le téacs agus íomhánna. As Béarla, beidh an teideal mar 'The Yawper - A Pamphlet on The Arts & Irish - Birr'. Beidh se ar fáil saor in aisce don phobal agus le léamh in áiteanna éagsúla timpeall an cheantair.

Cabhróidh an paimfléad le cúrsaí ealaíona agus ealaíontóirí a chur chun tosaigh i mBiorra agus

freisin chun daoine áitiúla agus cuairteoirí a chur ar an eolas faoi imeachtaí Gaeilge atá ar siúl sa cheantar. Beidh na hait scríofa ag ealaíontóirí éagsúla agus cainteoirí líofa Gaeilge (áitiúil don chuid is mó) agus beidh an Béarla agus an Ghaeilge measctha ann i slí nádúrtha. Beidh na hait gairid go leor, idir 150 agus 600 focal. Beidh meascán de fhicsean agus neamhfhicsean ann le gnéithe stairiúla agus comhaimseartha.

Ón lá a léigh mé an focal, bhí mé i gcónaí ag iarraidh a bheith i mo 'paimfléadaí'. Bhí mé i gcónaí ag lorg slí chun na healaíona a chur chun tosaigh sa saol agus cabhrú leis an nGaeilge a bheith feicthe mar teanga úr agus beo timpeall orainn.

(Buíochas le Oifig Ealaíon Uíbh Fháilí, leis na scríbhneoirí go dtí seo agus le hAilbhe do na haistriúcháin.)

Tanya O'Callaghan

Bright lights of Los Angeles becomes home to Mullingar native Tanya O'Callaghan

Tanya O'Callaghan is an established freelance musician / bassist with an eclectic impressive career to date. 100% born and raised in Ireland where her musical journey began, now based in Los Angeles when not on the road on a bass venture elsewhere, Tanya has made her mark both on stages and in studios worldwide. Tanya's versatility has led her to work with world renowned artists such as Maynard James Keenan, Ronnie Wood, Westlife, Riptide Movement, Michael Angelo Batio and Orianthi to name a few. Tanya was also a member of the RTÉ house band appearing on many shows such as The Voice, The Late Late Show and the Eurovision.

Comfortable in a jaw dropping range of styles, Tanya has collaborated with a diverse and formidable roster of artists across the world. Growing up in the small but musically powerful town of Mullingar in Ireland, she crafted her skills playing with just about every band in the country that needed a bass line.

Tanya was widely respected on the Irish music scene before spreading her wings further afield and touring worldwide, and she now bases herself in Los Angeles. While the Irish rhythm technician is entirely

comfortable powering through propulsive rock tempos, her prismatic talents extend far beyond any single genre.

Regularly guesting on blues, funk and RnB projects with various bands, Tanya is also a go-to-session musician on the speed dials of many big name producers. Her inventive rhythms and fearless experimentalism along with a healthy dose of sarcasm and sense of humour to 'beat the band', makes for an all round unique artist. Tanya has just completed a US tour with RnB/ pop artist Jordan Fisher and currently is internationally touring with Dee Snider (of the legendary Twisted Sister). When not on the road, Tanya is working in L.A. on various studio sessions and as always is continually working away on the sideline for animal welfare related issues.

Tanya describes herself as "... a full time professional musician touring the world and gathering ink and musical memories on my travels, outgoing, animal lover, bass guitar maniac, vegetarian, total Aries by nature, passionate globe trotter :)", her full bio can be found at www.tanyaocallaghan.com.



Moate Comhaltas and Dún na Sí

2017 promises to be a very busy and exciting year for the Moate Branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. This year Moate Comhaltas will host the Westmeath County Fleadh, hold their first Féile and continue with their Seisiún events, all while celebrating their 50th anniversary.

The Westmeath County Fleadh will take place in Moate from Friday 12th to Sunday 14th May. This is Westmeath's most prestigious event in the traditional arts calendar. It promises to be a competitive weekend of music and dance. A large crowd of enthusiasts are expected and a full programme of events will be available closer to the date.

The Féile event happens from 16th to 18th June. Moate has a very proud tradition of Céilí Bands, which began with the establishment of the Moate Céilí Band in 1932. Interestingly they were the 'first provincial céilí band' to broadcast from Radio Éireann. Féile weekend will consist of Junior and

Senior Céilí Band competitions, Workshops, Sessions, Gig Rig and a Gala Concert, all culminating with a Family Fun Day which will be held in Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park on the Sunday.

Every year the Moate Comhaltas Seisiúns take place in the summer months of July and August at Dún na Sí. It is a showcase of Irish music, song, dance and storytelling, featuring authentic traditional entertainment as enjoyed by generations of Irish people. Visitors from far and wide come to experience Seisiún at Dún na Sí.

Big Maggie



by John B. Keane presented by Fourth Wall Laois Theatre Group

Fourth Wall Theatre Group is Co. Laois's new theatre group consisting of new and experienced talent. The play stars, Margaret McKenna, one of Carlow Little Theatre's finest actors having recently appeared in Calendar Girls. The play also stars and is directed by Kevin Lalor-Fitzpatrick and Michelle O'Sullivan, also featuring the crème de la crème of acting talent.

The play opens with the burial of Maggie Polpin's husband Walter, she sits away on a tombstone while the rosary is recited. It becomes apparent that Maggie didn't have an easy life with her husband due to his fondness for whiskey and his womanising, some believed that Maggie and Walter were never a suitable match. As her two daughters and two sons join her after the burial Maggie soon lets them know some of her intentions, she has a shop and farm to run and intends wasting no time, Maggie is determined to create a better life for herself and her children, there are changes coming for all her family although they won't all be happy with her plans.

There are a few twists and turns involving the handsome salesman Teddy Healion, the Madden family and more.

Fourth Wall Theatre Group will be performing in the Dunamais Theatre, Portlaoise on Friday 12th and Saturday 13th May. For other performance details please follow the Fourth Wall Laois Theatre Group facebook page.

Our Sweetest Hour

Greg Traynor, a native of Edenderry, has put pen to paper and has written a brand new play/musical called "One Sweet Hour".

Greg is probably better known throughout the midlands for being an Elvis impersonator, something he has been doing for the last 15 years. From a very early age Greg has been involved in the arts, playing such parts as Danny in 'Grease', Judas in 'Jesus Christ Superstar', Jesus in 'Godspell', Henry Higgins in 'My Fair Lady' and Will in 'Oklahoma'. He has also appeared in lots of TV commercials down through the years, currently in the Avonmore commercial. He has also played with successful bands in his career

including The John Hogan Band and The Showband Show.

Greg has been helped and guided with this new production by his fellow Edenderry and Offaly man Eugene O'Brien, author of 'Eden', 'Pure Mule', and more recently, 'The Flag'.

The premiere of 'One Sweet Hour' will be held in The Tullamore Court Hotel on Friday the 12 May. Surely a must on your theatrical calendar.



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



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