

The Choir Project

The following is a brief history of the development of the project, and a few impressions of what we've observed so far.

Summary

A new theatre piece, based on the extraordinary level of participation in choirs throughout this island and beyond.

Written by Amy Conroy with an original score by Danny Forde.

One of the inspirations for this work is the Michel Tremblay choral piece *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer*, which was produced in new version by Rough Magic in 2009. This work is based on choral speaking, comprising overlapping parallel narratives, spoken by the tenants of a Montreal apartment block as they stand on their balconies on a hot summer night. Although the piece was inspired by a Bizet Mass, none of it is sung.

Context

Music is central to the piece, but its primary focus is on the people and their diverse stories. Singing in a choir is the only point of contact many people have with an artistic practice. This piece of theatre will be an exploration of modern Ireland, using grass-roots participation in choral singing, and examining the reasons behind it.

There are so many forms of this engagement, from a woman who was a member of the AIB choir through the banking crisis, to my mother and her pals, a bunch of sharp

eighty year-olds who have been in a choir together in Belfast since the 1940s and whose participation provided them with a window to a world.

This project had its genesis in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. We wanted to make a show that looked at the state of the nation and how we got to this point of apparent meltdown. It seemed that while the hubris of the Celtic Tiger had led to a shocking fall, there were - and are - infrastructures, at a local, regional and national level, that successfully motored on, and in some cases seemed impervious to macro-collapse. Although we looked at the Health Service, the GAA, the funeral industry and so on, we kept returning to choirs as an activity that was extremely comprehensive - pan-national, cross-border and engaging people across age, gender and social class. Also, as an activity based on performance, it's a good fit for a theatre company.

The idea received enthusiastic response from theatre managers in venues across the country. So, in its philosophy, but also in its practical application, it is a national project (with potential to become an international one).

We nonetheless found it difficult to get it started. The first creative team comprised a writer and a dramaturg. They had some preliminary meetings with choirs, but found the whole thing overwhelming in terms of the time commitment implied, and the vastness of the material. The second team (two writers) also found this, and couldn't quite move away from focusing on the internal nature of a particular choir. So they ended up writing something that was of the nature of a social comedy; and that was never really the intention. The

impulse to make the piece came from a desire to investigate the condition of Irish contemporary life through a particular, wide-angle lens, and to do that it seems to need both a micro and a macro approach.

I let it sit for a bit and then approached Amy Conroy, who had become our writer-in-residence at Rough Magic, and whose approach to character, and ear for speech, is ideal. I also asked Ronan Phelan, our Associate Director, who has a particular interest and skill in music theatre, to join the team with a view to directing the production. Finally, and crucially, Danny Forde, a composer who has great experience in vocal composition and ongoing connections to a number of choirs, joined the creative partnership. Danny and Ronan had both been participants in SEEDS - our artist development programme, and had worked together and with the company.

Initial contact.

The next step forward was in the autumn of 2018, when Rough Magic toured Ronan's production of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to venues all around the country. As it happened, Amy was also a performer in that acting ensemble, and the tour brought us to many of the venues that were interested in the show. It was a perfect opportunity to introduce ourselves to individual choir people; and the regional venues were instrumental in making those connections.

In Portlaoise we met with 65 Kitchen Choir, so called because they started - and rehearse - in the kitchen of No 65. This is a community choir, and they do it for fun, for social interaction. We also met a remarkable Nigerian

woman called Abisola Idris – she has set up a gospel choir, as a way of providing social support (in the societal sense) within the community.

In Letterkenny Amy met with Margaret McAteer, a powerhouse of local choir activity, and Declan Magee and Aine McCarron from the Inishowen Gospel Choir.

In Longford we met Eimer Reynolds (ex-Rose of Roscommon) who took her Community Choir of over 80 people to New York for the St Patrick's Day parade. Also, Fintan Farelly of the Cathedral Choir and Birdie Gobl of the local Gospel choir. He was interested in the fine art of choral singing, she in movement and the energy of the act of singing.

Waterford offered rich material. We met Kevin O'Carroll, a professional choirmaster who conducts Madrigallery, amongst others. Later that day we met his brother, a trained amateur singer and choirmaster with the Waterford Male Voice Choir; and then Lynn Cahill, who sings with a woman's choir called Voci, and who is one of the organisers with Notable Works, an organisation that does big choral events such as *The Messiah* at Christmas.

Tralee is the home of the National Folk Choir – we didn't get to meet them as yet, but we're in contact with Geraldine Hurley, who runs that part of the Siamsa Tire operation.

We've also been put in touch with the Discovery Gospel Choir. It's based in Cathal Brugha Street, in inner city Dublin, and was set up 11 years ago to integrate immigrants, including refugees, into the surrounding community. It's a big intercultural choir so the music is

international – sung in many languages - and it has people from all walks of life involved on a voluntary basis; people granted asylum, from Direct Provision centres, European, African and Asian immigrants - and a number of Irish. Danny plays with them frequently.

We have recently begun to record interviews, and have spoken to people in Portlaoise, Waterford and Limerick so far. These interviews have been transcribed and made available to the GBHI.

My mother has arranged that she and her friends who have sung together since their school days will meet us in Belfast and share their experiences over so many decades; including the period of the Troubles, when being a member of a choir was the only way travelling abroad and gaining a window on the world outside the grim confines of Northern Ireland.

Current position

So far, so good; but as a theatre company, working with limited resources and a full production schedule, we were unable to progress beyond these initial connections. A really crucial development, for us, has been the residency at the Trinity Long Room Hub. The Choir Project has been significantly enabled by the support of the Hub and GBHI; this has provided the essential seed funding for the project, allowing us to commission Amy and Danny properly and to pay Ronan for his input to the development process. But it has also given us structure, and we were able to take the first step in in February for the Hub's 10th Anniversary Event. The Mornington Choir, under Orla Flanagan's brilliant direction, performed a piece called Crumlin 3.50am; text by

Amy, music by Danny, the very first piece of this enormous jigsaw to be experienced by a live audience.

We are hoping for a public presentation of work-in-progress at the Hub, as soon as restrictions are lifted, later this year. This schedule will allow us to plan for a full production in the autumn of 2021.

But there is a great deal more investigation and thinking to be done before then. The conversations I have had so far have given me some insights that will certainly provide avenues for exploration. While Amy will focus initially on individual stories, I'm drawn to the societal and infrastructural patterns.

Firstly, the overarching impression is of passion and energy (I'm conscious of my use of descriptive language, and the need to be as objective as possible). The time commitment made by these people is enormous; although some of the conductors are paid, the remuneration cannot be equal to the service rendered.

There is also impressive demonstration of entrepreneurial, administrative and operational prowess. Taking a choir of 90 to take part the New York St Patrick's Day Parade is no small task, yet Eimer Reynolds managed it; and there is an organisation called CORus running choir practice cells all over Dublin, that come together for several sold-out performances in the Helix to raise a substantial amount of money for charity. They rehearse separately, convening as an ensemble of more than 200 singers - usually twice a year - with remarkable synchronicity.

I'm also trying to track down the member of the AIB choir, who sang all through the economic collapse, as the bank

disintegrated around them. This seems to me a fascinating scenario in itself.

When I visited Limerick recently I met two different choirs. The Community choir rehearses in Mary Immaculate College, at lunchtimes, twice a week. They are sent their material via WhatsApp, by their energetic and delightful choirmaster, Paul. Most of them don't read music, and no one is turned away. The atmosphere is irreverent, good humoured, but serious enough to produce a very solid sound. Tea and sandwiches are provided afterwards. It felt like the very best kind of lesson, with a benign teacher. All were fulsome in their praise of Paul.

The Women's Choir practise in the evenings. It's run by Maire-Keary Scanlon, a lovely woman who has the air of a gently harrassed schoolteacher. The members are formidable women, rather a handful, who are never short of chat, as she points out. But when they begin to sing, you realise how very committed they are – the standard is excellent. So yes, they do it for the craic – but they are hugely interested in musicality and excellence. When I asked them about their trips abroad I was reminded of my mother's choir – also all-female.

There is a common thread of joyous escapism, and the seeming benefits of a lack of male participants. This note was also struck when we talked to the choirmaster of the Male Voice Choir in Waterford. Is this unhealthy segregation? Or just a kind of nostalgic return to adolescence, or even childhood? The choirmaster in Waterford missed bringing his wife on these trips (they sing together in another choir). The comfort, or at least pleasure, of losing the pressures of cross-gender politics seem to me

an interesting feature. Even in the community choir, which is mixed, I was taken with the classroom setting and the apparent delight of shelving adult cares, returning to a world where decisions were made by someone else, if only for a couple of hours a week. (I stress that this is just my interpretation).

The impression I get in general is of people who are reliant on choral participation as an emotional and psychological oasis, whether they are in good, bad or indifferent states of mental health.

There are also the choirs that deal with the particular focus of the GBHI, which is Alzheimer and dementia sufferers. The Forget-me-not Choir does extraordinary work in this area. I suspect there has to be a connection between the triggering of memory in acute sufferers, and the less critical, but equally powerful experience of nostalgia (and emotional relief) that seems to be expressed by the majority of choir participants – music seems to be key to this. One way or the other there is an overwhelming sense of a need satisfied (although there was a humorously rueful - and rather poignant - account by an interviewee in Waterford of her disappointment when she thought she was being promoted to soprano status, only to be left in the lesser ranks of the altos).

There is also the diversity in the nature of the choirs; this has to be represented in the final work, however fictional the internal narratives. This will require a core company of eight actors who can sing and perform across all the styles we encounter, and who have a representative ethnic mix and gender balance.

Next stage

The Donegal choral community is extremely vibrant, and in far-flung regions there must be great reliance on this kind of participation. We were hoping to travel to Ramelton in Donegal in April for an exchange event with a visiting choir from France, but this isn't possible during the current crisis. Many choirs, who usually operate September – June, have been hit badly by the COVID-19 shutdown and most will not be in action again until the autumn.

However, there is already no shortage of source material. The piece will be researched more extensively through autumn 2020. We are in continuous dialogue with regional theatres, including all of the regional tour venues and two theatres in Northern Ireland, that have strong local involvement in choral groups. The production is intended to be performed by a Rough Magic Ensemble, who would intersect with amateur choirs around the country in a major new national co-production; partnering with audiences in the development of a work that is for and about them.

We are very grateful to Brian Lawlor for the opportunity to work with you all; and for the support of Jane Ohlmeyer and the TLRH. Our public presentation is postponed for the moment, but we will have something to show you, even virtually, before the year is out.

Lynne Parker
May 2020.