

THE POWER IN THE FEET



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Printed and distributed by the Arts Office,
Sligo County Council, Market Yard, Sligo
Tel: +353 71 9140985
Email: arts@sligococo.ie
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Design / Red Eye
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“The Vogler residency has been a great success, greater even than we could have hoped for.”

An interview with **Mary McAuliffe**, Arts Officer, Sligo Co. Council



Interview by **Dermot Healy**
November 2003



The Short Cut to The Rosses

It was a mixture of traditional and classical in our house in Dunfanaghy, County Donegal. My mother is from Falcarragh in the Donegal Gaeltacht where there is a lot of music-making. She plays the piano and the fiddle and sings songs like *The Shortcut to the Rosses* and *The Kerry Dances*, all the old favorites. She used to sing with *The Letterkenny Singers* up until about ten years ago and they performed at competitions all over the North West. I once travelled to Sligo to hear her sing at the Sligo Choral Competitions.

So my first introduction to Sligo was through music and song, and it made a good impression on me.

At primary school, our teacher was Master Cannon, the father of Moya Cannon the poet. He was a great lover of music, who played the fiddle in the classroom, moving about, and we would dance to his playing. It was the people around me infused me with my love of music – my mother, my sister and my aunt who loved opera. She lived in Dublin and as children when she visited our house she would tell my sister and I the love stories behind the various operas. We enjoyed that. When I went to secondary school I automatically took musicianship up to Inter Cert. There were thirty of us in the music class and our work involved studying the great composers, listening to their works, sometimes for a full class. Essentially, it meant listening, not playing, though I also studied piano extra-curricularly. I entered Slogadh with some class mates, singing with harp and piano accompaniment, Eyna was in that group, there were five of us-it was great fun.



But I had no real desire to pursue that - I wasn't a musician - it was listening I loved. And still do.

Teaching

When I left college my first job was at Pobalscoil Chloich Cheannfhaola the community school in Falcarragh Co. Donegal. There were a lot of creative people on the staff — two English teachers, Tom Walsh and Murray Learmont who were into drama and theatre, there was a writer Fr. Sean Gallagher and a music teacher Anne Giblin. Also Cathal Ó Searcaigh, the Irish language poet, worked there as writer-in-residence just before I left in 1988. Sometimes in life you're fortunate enough to have a relationship or fusion with people that nurture you and inspire you. Through them, I got involved in extra curricular work with the students, firstly as a member of the production team for various dramas then specifically in costume and make-up.

We entered the students in various school competitions and they were very successful—it was a great time to be there. The creative energy that existed among us was infectious. I moved onto choreography, and eventually to devising and directing an actual piece of drama called Crá Aoife, which won an excellence award in Slogadh in 1986.

I took a long time devising that work, selecting and mixing the music myself, and this in fact drew me further into the world of music. That environment gave me the confidence to test my ability in these areas and has been the bedrock for what I've done since.



I learned the importance of creativity, and more importantly, I had an outlet to express myself creatively.

I suppose I'm rarely specific about turning points or particular significant instances in my own life, but that doesn't mean they're not there. I might talk about the importance of creativity, but a lot of things come under that heading: the word itself can blind you to the specifics. But the environment and the space of that period gave me a great impulse to get things done. Creativity is for me a need, a desire, a way of communicating.

I want to be at things, and I want to share.

Teaching taught me that, but on the other hand the opportunities I sought were maybe elsewhere. The school was excellent, the teachers were great and so were the kids, but I found the secondary educational system at that time very restricting. Something was missing for me. Year in, year out, the only real change was the kids.

On The Move

I'd been teaching for six years and took a career break. I went to Canada where I worked as a waitress and travelled extensively. Then I moved to London and taught drama as a supply teacher at Lillian Baylis, a 2nd level school in the inner city Oval/Kennington area. The children were mostly Afro-Caribbean and West Indian. I wasn't a curriculum-based teacher so I had lots of freedom devising drama with them.



They had a lot of difficulties, both social and otherwise, but their sense of music was dynamic. I drew on their cultural strengths; dance, rhythm and rapping, and I loved it. They taught me how to take rhythm and develop it into a performance. For them rap is not about words, but movement. What I encountered was very new, and very alien, but at another level there were a lot of common threads. It wasn't Irish dancing, but it wasn't far away from it.

When you look at Irish dancing, it looks like there's a burning energy being restricted by the strict posture of the top half of the body, it's the fixed hips against the looseness going down through the legs, and then shooting into the feet. The footwork is where the energy is realised with all its power and velocity and strength. When Irish dancing is being performed at its best is when you see all the power packed into the feet.

The West-Indian dance was freer than ours and more all-embracing. The rhythm was dispersed throughout the body, and then came the words, the rap.

They taught me a lot of things, and movement was the language we had in common between us.



Arts Planning

I spent two years in London, then I came back to Donegal and worked in the family business, a craft-retail business run by my mother.

We sold knitwear, glass, pottery, jewellery, rugs, throws and books. Yes I enjoy reading, I think my father passed on a love of reading and books to me. He reads quickly and all the time, but I'm a lazy reader. I like to take my time with books. I spent four years in the business with my mother. The business was seasonal running from Easter to Halloween every year, and I suppose I brought in new ideas from my travels, for example we expanded the range of goods that we sold, but in truth I didn't know what direction to take at the time, but, like teaching, that shop was a great training ground for the job I'm in now. Finally, I went back to the University of Ulster, Magee Campus in Derry, and studied for a Diploma in Social Science.

I always had an interest in it - I was always fascinated by people, their behaviour, their motivations, impulses, their actions and reactions. I was also very curious about myself, as much as by other people, and through others learnt much about myself. The end of my two year diploma coincided with the end of my career break from teaching. I was quite clear in my mind that I didn't want to return to my role as a secondary teacher, but was looking for a way to combine education and the arts.

That's when I discovered the Diploma in Arts Administration in UCD.



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Land of Heart's
Desire

There were about twenty in our class, and from memory approximately three of them were male. The truth is I don't know why there are so many women in Arts Administration and so few men. Arts Officers vary greatly in their path to that role. Some like myself come from a teaching and education background others from an art college background and there are those who come directly from a particular art-form i.e. drama or music. There is no set route. Anyway, the course was very demanding and intensive, but it gave me what I was looking for - a career that had started out in education would continue, but now I had a larger context within which to place it.

I had no idea of the history of the Arts in Ireland; as a matter of fact I didn't know there was an Arts Council in Ireland until I attended UCD. It's hard to believe, but this is true. A whole new horizon opened up. It was an interesting time in the Arts - 1993/1994. The first ministry for the arts and culture was established in 1992 with Michael D. Higgins serving as the first Minister. He introduced the concept of arts planning and the preparation of the first Arts Plan by the Arts Council in 1995 and by local authorities for their respective areas. For anyone with an interest in arts development, like myself it was a very exciting time. This meant for me - broadening access to workshops in theatre, dance music and writing, especially for local communities and neighborhoods. In my experience of the arts at community level at that time there were many groups active in the Arts, but they tended to be exclusive and overworked. Plus, there were few public supports in place.



The Amateur Drama Movement was and is a great success, and there were many like them, for example musical societies, creative writing groups and painting groups who funded their own activities with small grants from their local authorities, but in my travels I had encountered, for the first time, publicly supported arts programmes by Municipal authorities, which included all aspects of the arts: from public readings to street performance to outdoor concerts and so on.

As a member of the public, I could engage with these events without being a member of any group - this to me was very new - and I wanted to see this happen in Ireland. With the creation of the ministry and the introduction of arts planning such access now became a possibility.

Edinburgh

As part of the diploma in arts administration we had to do a three month work placement in a cultural organisation.

I was lucky to be placed with The Museums and Galleries division of Edinburgh District Council under the direction of The Keeper of Social History, a term I had never come across before. At that time they were working on the development of a small community museum in Newhaven and I was assigned to this project. The community in Newhaven was effectively displaced in the 40's and moved to new urban areas with a lot of social consequences, primarily, the great sense of loss felt by many in the community and the negative impact on their sense of identity and their sense of place.



The Council were working - not on the grand issues of history - but on social history within local neighbourhoods i.e. work, leisure, entertainment etc. Much of the work had to do with memory, recall and storytelling.

This took place collectively in workshops organized by the Council and through individual interviews. As we set up the museum it also involved me trawling through Edinburgh's thrift shops for items of clothing and objects relevant to the recreation of life in Newhaven when it was still a thriving fishing community. I was always fascinated by history, particularly social history, and I had never encountered anything like this. I began to see the decline of the fishing community back home in Dunfanaghy in a new light.

Insignificant things took on a new value.

I always knew these things that I grew up with were of value in some sense, but now a public authority was affirming this. But then, on the other hand, that same authority was the one who had displaced the fishing community in the interest of progress and development in the first place. The damage was done, but rather than ignore it, they were trying to create a mechanism for remembering. Industrialisation takes its toll. The council had no idea of the social consequences. Museums can be examples of societies failure - nor can they ever replace a society, or the culture of a society.

But, looked at another way, society itself is a living museum, meaning creativity is not frozen. It's in a continuum. It's a space we inhabit and sometimes we like to venerate, not only the artefacts, but also the minds that made them.



The act of remembering can correct mistakes about to be made in the future. A museum, in a way, is a warning. One of the roles of a public authority is to heed this warning, and to try and create access within the community for the work to continue.

The tools may change, but the work goes on, and sometimes the best work has been done by tools that have become obsolete, hence their importance. And this will continue to happen. So you try to match both needs, and create a space where people can innovate, maintain and sustain.

This period in Edinburgh was very significant because it showed me how important public agencies could be in carrying out these cultural duties. Up to then I'd never considered working as a local authority Arts Officer, I didn't perceive local government as a dynamic place, and I was wrong. That view was challenged and changed by my time in Edinburgh.

I returned in 1994 with a totally different outlook.

Waterford

I had my first opportunity to put this experience into practice when I was appointed as the first Arts Officer in Waterford in 1995. I suppose I did go there with an agenda.

I applied for the particular post because I knew that Waterford was a small industrial city.



Its size appealed to me as a place where access to the Arts, through local government support, might be developed along the lines I'd experienced in Edinburgh. Already there was a solid and varied infrastructure in place – Red Kettle Theatre Company, Garter Lane Art Centre, the Theatre Royal, and, among many others, Waterford Youth Drama. At that time, a lot of activity was based in the city centre, and confined to it.

The first thing I had to do was devise a Municipal Arts Plan for the city. This entailed researching what cultural groups already existed and their specific needs; looking at what the Municipal Authority already provided by way of grants, and then studying how best things could be improved and the Arts extended into the various communities.

The plan was adopted by the Corporation and implemented over a three-year period. One of the most important goals of the plan was to try and break down barriers which were holding back the public, there and elsewhere in Ireland, from participation in the Arts.

These barriers included:

1. A feeling among the general public that the Arts were elitist.
2. People being intimidated by the notion that art required a lot of knowledge and understanding before they could participate.
3. People seeing art as divorced from their everyday lives.



I worked with the existing organisations – Waterford Youth Drama, Red Kettle and Spraoi, and the community and youth centers – in various ways, but specifically I put into place a series of residences; in dance (Deirdre Grant), literature (Moya Cannon), photography (Christine Simpson), drama (Liam Maher), the visual Arts (Maureen Grant), and eventually, Vivienne Gold, in music.

The Bands

There is a huge band tradition in Waterford – marching bands, concert bands, but over the years they had a run into a major problem: the older members felt the standards were slipping, there was a shortage of instructors, and the voluntary effort put into keeping the traditional skills intact was under terrible pressure.

The musical tradition had suffered, even though it was still alive, it was weakened.

The other issue was that the bands tended to work alone, independent of each other, so there was limited contact between them. Therefore funding was inadequate and volunteers were hard pressed. The Arts Council had set up a scheme for musicians-in-residence, but to my knowledge no one had availed of it, and by chance, in '96, I think we were the first to appoint a musician to such a post.



The musician chosen was Vivienne Gold. She was a trumpeter, and her residency was not only a success, but was extended. She came from a band tradition in Belfast city so knew the background well. Besides her skill as a musician and performer she also had a great capacity to empathise with the local bands.

In time she drew all the bands together, worked tirelessly on technique, went back to the core of the tradition, and the highlight of her residency was a big public concert where all the bands collectively performed.

It was a busy period. All the residencies worked very well in terms of broadening access for people who had never been involved in such projects before, but, though the success motivated people to become involved, there was no structure intact to maintain development - either for the artist or the community. Both participant and artist put a lot of effort into the workshops, the event and the presentation; but then it all ended; the artist moved on to a different community and the previous participants were left frustrated and with insufficient support.

We had success, but the projects ended. We needed continuity.



Sligo

In my second year in Waterford (1996) the post of Arts Officer in Sligo was advertised. Unlike Waterford it was not too far from home. As I've said, I'd known Sligo as a child from family holidays, particularly Lissadell, Mullaghmore and Sligo town. I was aware of it as a creative and vibrant place, and like Waterford, it had an established arts network that really appealed to me.

I started in May 1997.

Once again the first task was to draw up a County Arts Plan, have it adopted by the County and Borough Council's, secure a budget to see it implemented. There was one difference between Waterford and Sligo.

In Sligo T.V. Honan, an Arts consultant, had been appointed by the Arts Council and Sligo County Council to carry out some preliminary research on setting up the County Arts Office. His main recommendations were that the Sligo local authorities should become actively involved in arts development and that an Arts Officer be appointed to implement a 3-year plan. So the ground had been prepared for me. He had made certain policy recommendations, so my role was to come up with goals and actions to match these policy areas.

The first thing about Sligo that influenced my decisions was that, although I was working in a county where a lot of artistic activity was already in place, and the general public were aware of cultural associations and groups, the downside was that there was quite limited arts development work happening at that time, which had obvious implications for continuity.



Another critical factor was - I had limited resources, on the personnel front there was only myself, there was no budget in place. That would be decided later by the Council estimates. So whatever programme I set up had to take account of certain restrictions.

It was a lonely time.

I started by researching the projects already in place in the county. Based on my experience in Waterford I wanted my work in Sligo to have a long term perspective, with a commitment to continuity. I initiated discussions with artists and various arts, community and voluntary groups to identify their needs.

County Sligo Youth Theatre

In 1998 The Arts Office, The Hawks Well Theatre and the Blue Raincoat Theatre Company came together to create County Sligo Youth Theatre. We got a lot of help in the early stages from the NAYD. The Youth Theatre was launched in April 1999 by the writer Pat MC Cabe.

We started with an advertisement in schools and youth clubs to get members for a weekly workshop, one to be held in Sligo town, and the other in Tubbercurry. There would have been 25 to 30 members overall at that time, aged 16 - 22. There was a team of facilitators: Niall Henry, Ciaran Mc Cauley and Fiona McGeown (Blue Raincoats), Pete Mullineaux (Galway Youth Theatre), and Sorcha Carroll (Dhá Éin).



They presented an annual production in either The Hawks Well Theatre or in The Factory Performance Space.

1. 1999, Broken Plastic Chairs, a devised work by members under the direction of Irma Grothuis.
2. 2000, The Visit by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, directed by Pete Mullineaux.
3. 2001, Iph directed by David Grant was an adaptation of the Greek Legend of Iphigeneia in Aulis written by Colin Teevan.
4. 2002, The Woman in White adapted by Michael Harding from the novel by Wilkie Collins and directed by Bernadette Meehan.
5. 2003, Blood Wedding by Lorca, and East of the Sun West of the Moon adapted from a Norwegian folktale by Joel Mason and Jeffrey Hilditch, both directed by Bernadette Meehan.

They were all difficult but very successful pieces of theatre.

Since those early days County Sligo Youth Theatre has come a long way. They now have Bernadette Meehan working as their Leader and Artistic Director and they have secured their own studio space with assistance from Blue Raincoat Theatre Company; they have their own Board of Directors and the workshop programme has expanded to include younger members in the 11-14 age group.

It's a going concern.



The Maugherow Project

What went on to become The Maugherow Project was originally proposed as a community arts project by the visual artist Sinead Aldridge who lived in the area at the time. The focus on older people in the community in rural areas came from myself and the decision to place the project in North Sligo emerged because of the large numbers of older people living in the area, one of the largest in the county, and out of discussions with Council staff and Councillors.

It was set-up to explore the possibility of using the arts both to address the social exclusion and isolation of older people, and to benefit the young people of a rural area; with both groups coming together and working in tandem on certain projects.

Ann O'Connor was appointed as project co-ordinator in 2000, and to date the Maugherow Project, which is still on-going in 2004, has had over 50 participants, aged from 10 to 80, who attend weekly workshops. The old people are picked up from home by bus courtesy of The North Western Health Board; the local school has facilitated the weekly workshops, plus their students have been a driving force in its success through the entire process.

To date the project has produced two very fine publications; Séidéán Sí an introductory exhibition catalogue and Unwrapping Creativity, The Maugherow Resource Handbook both written by Ann O' Connor. There is a 20 minute video documentary of the project by Maria Gibbons. Annual exhibitions are held each May to showcase work in progress and as a community event.



In 2001 there was a major exhibition of the work of the project hosted by the Model Arts & Niland Gallery called Séideán Sí and a one day seminar held to coincide with it.

Over the years the project has employed various artists in various fields – Sinead Aldridge, Martina Coyle, Fionnuala Gallagher, John McDwyer, Catherine Fanning, Bettina Seitz, Bara Cassidy, Maura Gillen, Bernadette Meehan and numerous others; the participants have had workshops in drawing, sculpture, painting, drama, creative writing, ceramics, felt making and video. They go on field trips around the locality and have outings to various museums and art galleries.

A lot of the success of the project is due to the commitment of the participants and the ongoing enjoyment young and old get from the project. We are fortunate to have very committed partners in St Patrick's NS and The North Western Health Board and the Arts Council's investment in the project has played a significant role in ensuring quality and standards.

We are now at the stage where we are implementing two further projects with the North Western Health Board modeled on the Maugherow project – Art in a Daycare Setting in St. Anne's Youth and Community Centre, and The Abbey Quarter Project based in the Mercy Primary School. Both projects are running since 2003 and going well.



The Tiger

After the members of the Sligo local authorities adopted the Arts Development Programme in 1997 the County Council assigned Lorraine Mulligan to the Arts Office. We worked closely together in the setting up the projects.

As we approached the millennium, we could also see that soon Sligo would be entering its most substantial phase of capital development projects.

The National Development Plan; the unprecedented growth in the Irish economy; the Objective-1 status accorded to the West of Ireland by the European Union; all these various strands meant that a lot of capital and infrastructural projects could now take place.

I saw an opportunity for a number of art commissions that could be launched to the benefit of the public and the artists funded through the Department of the Environment Per Cent for Arts Scheme. Significant commissioning monies were available to artists through this scheme.



Per Cent for Art Scheme

The Per Cent for Art Scheme was introduced by the Department of Environment in 1986 - to promote the commissioning of art works by public authorities. Under this scheme 1% of the total capital cost of a project can be allocated for the commissioning of an artwork. Projects would include social housing schemes, road works, sewerage projects and so on.

This application of the scheme by local authorities is optional. It is very difficult to implement as there is a lot of additional work involved for people who are often already stretched with their own existing workload. The Sligo Authorities had not availed of the scheme up to this, but were keen to change this when the Arts Office was set up in 1997.

We wanted to see as much of this money as we could made available for art project commissions in Sligo. We also wanted to engage with the problems and criticisms of the scheme and address them based on the experience of others: some of these difficulties related to;

1. Managing and administering the scheme.
2. The additional workload required from Council staff to implement it.
3. Most projects under the scheme, both nationally and locally, were directed mainly towards visual projects, but unfortunately other art forms were not benefiting.
4. There was very little interaction between the commissioner (local authority), the artist (the creator) and the public (the audience).



All of this had to be looked at and addressed to allow us to move on, and to put in place the foundations necessary for the scheme to flourish in the future.

Public Art

We set up a Creative Arts Panel, the underlying themes being place and identity, and awarded 6 commissions through the Percent for Art Scheme.

1. The People's Purchase, two paintings by Sligo based artist Ronnie Hughes, selected by people from the Mail Coach Road and sited in City Hall.
2. Owning the Space, a visual and audio performance by Imelda Peppard.
3. Knoxpark Regeneration Project by Martina Coyle, Hilary Gilligan and Pauline O'Connell.
4. A contemporary tribute to Michael Coleman's musical achievements by Ron van der Noll.
5. Keepsakes by Ronnie Hughes, an installation linked to the Spanish Armada at Streedagh beach.
6. Laura Gannon's, Underswim.

With the funding awarded by Peace and Reconciliation we were able to appoint a coordinator and document all the commissioned projects. In 1999 Mary Mc Donagh took up the post and along with the Sligo Leader Partnership Company we put in place a Public Art Steering Group.



Their recommendations were adopted in full in 2002 which meant increased commissioning of art works, plus new and very welcome structures came into being i.e. the Public Art Coordinator became a Public Art Officer, a cross-community steering group was set up to oversee implementation of the Public Art Plan for Sligo and Joe Lee, an artist, film and video maker was appointed to curate the next series of 10 commissions between 2003 and 2005.

We are now very well placed to avail of ongoing opportunities under the Per Cent for Art Scheme to commission artworks to the benefit of artists and the general public.

The Vogler Quartet

In 1998 we advertised for a string quartet in County Sligo. The advertisement appeared in various national and international music magazines. One of the applicants was the Vogler Quartet.

Who are they? The Vogler Quartet, are four men, in their thirties, who were born and grew up in East Berlin.

They formed the quartet in 1985 and quickly established themselves as a major new talent on the circuit. Their first success of note was when they won the Evian Prize in France in 1986. They gained international recognition, but despite the award under the communist regime in East Berlin travel was extremely difficult for them.



When the Berlin Wall fell in 1987, they were free to travel, but had very limited funds. The Irish promoter John Ruddock who ran the Limerick Music Association heard them perform and was very impressed, it was he who brought them to perform in Ireland for the first time. I first became aware of them in the lead up to the appointment. It seemed like wishful thinking to imagine that an ensemble of their status would apply.

They sent us a CD of some of their recordings as part of their application. There was great excitement when we heard the recordings - and the Vogler were short-listed down to the final four. That a quartet of the caliber of Vogler had applied was considered a great honor. There was unanimity among the selectors that this was the right quartet for Sligo.

The Success

Only one problem arose. In the original plan the successful quartet was to move and live here in Sligo. This was one of the conditions of offer, but further to the signing the contract personal difficulties arose for a member of the quartet which ruled out such a move. It could have had very serious consequences for the quartet who at that stage had been together for 15 years. This was deemed unwarranted. Plus there was another practical reason for going ahead with the Vogler Quartet - their availability remained the same whether they lived here or not. The programme involved them being available to us in Sligo for approximately three months spread throughout the year, which was what we originally asked for and which we were still getting.



Because we went for a quartet with a huge international profile, they would, in any case, have been away touring for three out of four weeks of every month, mainly abroad. Although their families would have been living here, the musicians would not. So it amounted to the same thing—the programme was unaffected. It did not make sense to stick to the earlier condition.

The residency was launched in 1999. It started with a preparatory period of a year followed by a full delivery of the residency programme. In 2002 it was extended for a further two years ending in June 2004. Because the programme was so well thought out, and planned in each of these three areas – performance, music education and instrumental tuition – it was possible, without interference, to deliver the residency programme in full on a visiting basis, and it has been a great success, greater even than we could have hoped for.

Continuity

The emphasis was never exclusively on the Vogler Quartet, but to use them as a catalyst for development in the classical genre of music in County Sligo. That the residency was extended for a further two years was not only a bonus, but underlines the local authorities concern for continuity. And meanwhile the residency has given us a chance to consolidate and set in place planning for the future, not only for music projects, but for other art forms as well.

The foundations are in place and the relationships formed, both at political level and community level, for them to continue on, with even greater social impact and artistic collaboration.



A lot has changed over the past seven years. The Sligo local authorities and the Arts Council have been very supportive of the work of the Arts Office and this is reflected in the budgets allocated for projects and in the grants awarded to arts and cultural groups and organisations. We now have an Arts section within the local authority with a dedicated team of four: Rhona Feely (Assistant Arts Officer) Mary Mc Donagh (Public Art Officer) an arts development worker post which is currently vacant and myself. This level of support means that we can provide a high level of service to the general public and deliver a comprehensive countywide arts programme.

My job is to create an environment that supports artists, supports new work in any arts genre and helps to develop ways in which local communities can share in that work, and create their own.

One of the great delights of the last few years was when the Vogler Quartet played in a two teacher school in a remote part of County Sligo, and I saw the excitement on the children's faces as they took part in both performance and workshop. The fact that so many schools and teachers have voluntarily got involved in this project is a great inspiration to me. And I have not forgotten what the West Indian children taught me about movement. Or the fishing community in Newhaven that enhanced my view of museums. Nor the power in the feet in Irish dancing.

I'm still learning.

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“The foundations are in place and the relationships formed, both at political level and community level, for the work to continue on, with even greater social impact and artistic collaboration.”

Mary McAuliffe, Arts Officer, Co Sligo