



We've built it;  
why won't they come?

**John Burns**



## Introduction

*The Public and the Arts (2006)* study was commissioned by the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon to provide information on the current behaviour and attitudes of Irish people to the arts.

The study finds that public attitudes to the arts are very positive and that attendance levels are above international norms. Current patterns of attendance, participation and purchase are revealed, as well as private 'consumption' of arts and culture via an increasing range of media. However the study also showed some apparently contradictory findings – the public (as reflected in samples taken by the study) consider the arts to be important, even if they do not personally attend at formal arts events. This has prompted consideration of the many ways in which the arts influence day to day life, albeit sometimes invisibly.

Arising from the study the Arts Council / An Chomairle Ealaíon has asked a range of commentators to give their opinions and perspectives on *The Value of the Arts*. These pamphlets are intended to provoke discussion and to focus attention on the crucial role the arts can and do play in our lives as individuals, as members of diverse communities and as part of our wider society.

## We've built it; why won't they come?

*The Public and the Arts* report reminds me of the Irish language question in the census. "Can you speak Irish?", people are asked every four years. Indeed we can, respond up to half the population. "Alright then, DO you speak Irish?", they are asked. No we don't, respond two out of three.

In the study commissioned by the Arts Council, Irish people are asked if they think the arts are a good thing generally. Indeed they do. Four out of five agree that arts education in schools is as important as science. Three out of four believe providing arts amenities is as important as building sports facilities, and over half think government and local authority spending on the arts should be increased.

And are you personally interested in the arts? Indeed we are, respond 75%, with a virtuous 33% professing themselves strongly interested. Right, well, what have you been to see or hear recently, the questioners wanted to know. And suddenly we reached the point in the survey where people had to stop being virtuous or sucky-up. Like the point in the census where they had to stop saying they "can speak Irish" and reveal how often they actually did.

On the surface, Irish people don't just talk the talk, they walk the walk: 85% had attended at least one arts event in the last year. That was up on 1994, and compares well with the likes of England (80%).

But is the glass 85% full or 15% empty? The arts categories included films, rock music concerts, the circus, a country and western gig, arts exhibitions... and when you think about it, isn't it remarkable that more than one in ten of the population hadn't been to ANY of these in the last year?

Leaving that aside, when the figures are examined closely we find that the mainstream, populist arts - such as rock and pop music and film - are in rude health. But while those who go to the local cinema to see Rocky Balboa, or to the RDS to see George Michael, are technically attending an arts event, it's not what most would consider to be "the arts".

Going to a recital, an exhibition, a performance of ballet; reading an anthology of poetry or attending a reading by an author - now that's what entitles you to be considered a "culture vulture". By that standard, all is not so rosy.

Irish people are now less likely than they were in 1994 to attend a range of "highbrow" cultural events, such as art exhibitions and the theatre. Even slightly offbeat pastimes are less popular - including variety shows, and country and western music performances.

The survey findings in relation to the theatre are the most surprising, and disturbing. People may say they are interested in the arts, and they may aver that the arts should be supported, but there has been a 7% drop in the number

attending plays - something the human race has been doing since the beginning of civilisation.

It has never been easier to see a play in Ireland. The choice has hugely expanded, both in the capital and around the country. Dublin, for example, is necklaced by the Civic in Tallaght, the Pavilion in Dun Laoghaire and the Mermaid in Bray, Co. Wicklow - all of them supplementing the city-centre institutions with mainstream, accessible and entertaining fare.

It has never been simpler to reserve a seat - one click of a mouse does the trick for most theatres - and there has rarely been so much talent on show. Ralph Fiennes, Stephen Rea, Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon and John Mahoney are among the "big names" that have treaded the boards in Dublin over the last decade, and plays produced by our leading theatres have been showered with awards overseas.

Meanwhile the cost of theatre tickets in the Rip-Off Republic has most definitely not kept pace with inflation. While rock and pop concerts by run-of-the-mill acts will leave no change out of €50, a good theatre seat can be had for half the price. A meal for two in a middle-ranging restaurant would be more than double the price of twin seats in the Gate or the Gaiety.

And yet, attendance at Irish theatre has been falling. The middle classes - traditionally the theatre's greatest supporters - are staying away, and our institutions have not succeeded

in reaching out to other sections of society to replace them. For those who do frequent the theatre, the experience is likely to be an annual one. Fewer than half of those questioned go twice or more per year.

The revelation is troubling, not least for arts administrators and financiers. The Irish government is investing tens of millions in building new theatres, and refurbishing old ones, in Dublin and beyond. For what? So that the empty seats in Irish theatres will, at least, be well upholstered?

In addition, theatre is the most subsidised art-form in Ireland. The Arts Council hands millions each year to the big players - the Abbey, the Gate and so on. Shouldn't the money be following the trends? Open-air street theatre is gaining in popularity, the survey finds. Why not cut back funding on bricks and mortar, and channel it into theatre groups and events that don't need an expensive roof over their heads?

Theatres, and other arts institutions, will argue that they make great efforts to reach out to their audiences, to make their programmes flexible and amenable. I doubt that they are doing enough, however. Otherwise, how come 24% of people attended a theatre in the previous year, and 18% went to a concert hall or opera, but 33% had been to an open-air venue? Clearly there are audiences out there that are not being attracted indoors by our institutions.

Part of the reason for this, I suspect, is that many arts institutions run their programmes to suit themselves and their

staff rather than their potential patrons. Why, for example, do most plays and recitals start at 8pm on week-day nights? It is a starting time almost designed to deter the public rather than persuade them. Why not have plays and recitals when it suits most people - lunchtime, teatime, Sunday evenings, bank-holiday afternoons? That's when open-air festivals do their business, and that may be why they are more popular.

It might also help if these art buildings weren't such solemn places. What passers-by will be lured in to the Abbey, the National Gallery of Ireland or the National Concert Hall with their forbidding facades? Why don't these buildings reach out and pluck people off the street, convince them inside even by putting coffee shops in their foyers?

Maybe it's too late, at least for this generation. Because what this surveys says to me, more than anything, is that there has been too much emphasis on buildings and infrastructure and funding and administration. While arts administrators and politicians and, yes, sections of the media have been talking to themselves about grants and suchlike, the public have been listening to their iPods, or downloading Podcasts to watch on their PCs, or attending music festivals in the midlands. They're not listening, they don't care.

Yes they need encouragement and support to attend arts events, but I think arts authorities and institutions have to start engaging at an even more fundamental level. Take, for instance, what I regard as the most disturbing finding in the whole survey: that 46% of men never read for pleasure.

Clearly, there is absolutely no point in trying to convince such men to attend a reading of poetry, or a performance of Julius Caesar in the Abbey. The very notion of “the arts” as entertainment is obviously alien to them. Trying to convince them that the arts can be uplifting, educational, enriching would be well nigh impossible.

While “the education system” inevitably gets blamed for every failing in our adult population, it is difficult to believe that our schools have not let down their male students when so many of them leave school with no love of literature, and no inclination that reading can be fun and not a duty. Without that basic foundation, how can the Arts Council or any other institution build an edifice of engagement with the arts?

Another problem, and here I risk saying something genuinely controversial, is that too many senior arts posts in Ireland have been filled for too long by the same people. Becoming the director of certain institutions is a job for life, or for a very long period of your life anyway. Even if they tried, some of the administrators who have spent 10 years or more in their posts would not be able to reach out to a new, young generation and attract them into their buildings. They are out of touch with the marketplace.

Some of these institutes, and I can think of two in particular, are in desperate need of new blood, a younger hand on the tiller. It’s worked well at the Abbey, where Fiach MacConghail has been challenging old shibboleths and introducing reform.

There is a definite wake-up call in this survey for the Arts Council too. How is it to react to the findings? There is no point in it being defensive, or interpreting the outcome in negative terms. After all, there is nothing “wrong” with the public preferring mainstream culture or popular artforms. But there are signposts as to what the Council does need to do in the next few years.

First, it needs to take more practical steps to enable people to attend certain arts events. Much has been done in this area - and the survey finds that people find fewer obstacles in their way - but the challenge will only get more difficult. Luring people away from their PCs and their iPods will take ever more imaginative tactics in the future.

Second, I believe the Arts Council must immerse more in the mainstream and the popular, and not see its role only as providing alternatives to them. If the Council only concentrates on “highbrow” arts, it will find itself managing decline. If it instead engages in the mainstream, it will find ways to channel popular interest in more challenging directions. Why, for example, can’t the cinema-goer at the IFC to watch Rocky not get to see a short film by a young Irish film producer on the same bill?

Finally, the Arts Council must use this survey as a matrix against which to plot funding decisions. In journalism, reporters are told to follow the money. In arts, the money must to some extent follow the people.

Just as the tree falling in the forest only makes a sound if someone is there to hear it, so art can only have an impact if there are bums on seats to witness it. Anyone who ignores the findings of this 12-year review may find themselves out of business by the time the next one is published.

John Burns, **April 2007**  
*news editor of the Irish edition of The Sunday Times*

