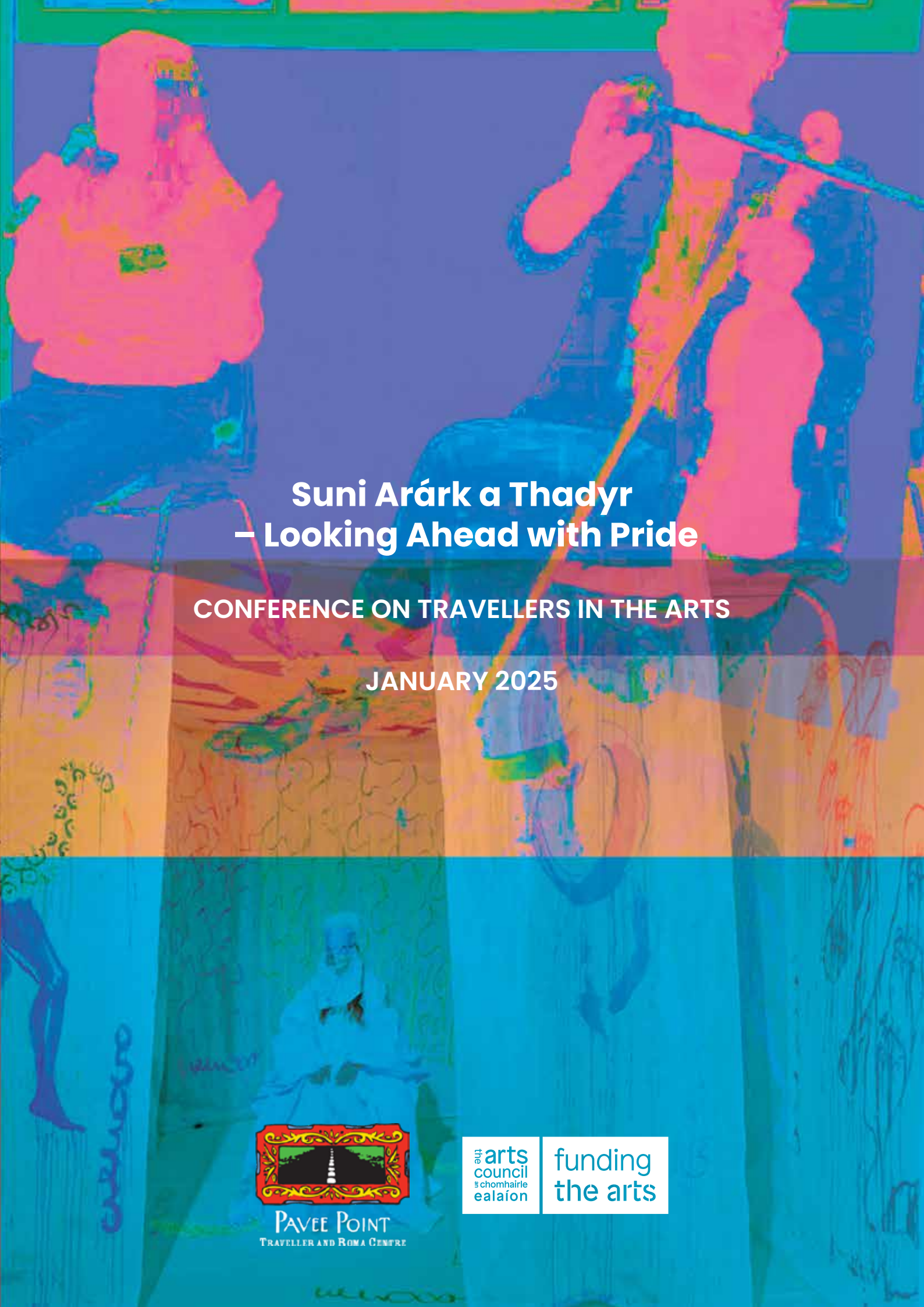


Suni Arárk a Thadyr – Looking Ahead with Pride

CONFERENCE ON TRAVELLERS IN THE ARTS

JANUARY 2025

Pavee Point
Traveller and Roma Centre

the arts council an chomhairle ealaíon

funding the arts



Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Welcome and Opening Remarks 2

Blue Tar Road by Helen Hutchinson 4

Rosaleen McDonagh and Delaine Le Bas in Conversation 6

Break Out Group Discussions Feedback 16

Interview with Michael Collins and Johnny Collins 20

Screening of *Sicár* 24

Panel Discussion 26

Key Takeaways 37

Closing remarks 37

Key Takeaways 39

All photos by Bryan Meade
Cover features *Incipit Vita Nova* by Delaine Le Bas

Introduction

This report on our conference *Suni Arark a Thadyr – Looking Ahead With Pride* aims to capture a sense of the day, which we feel was an important day in terms of Travellers and the arts – and a great way to begin Pavee Point's 40th anniversary year.

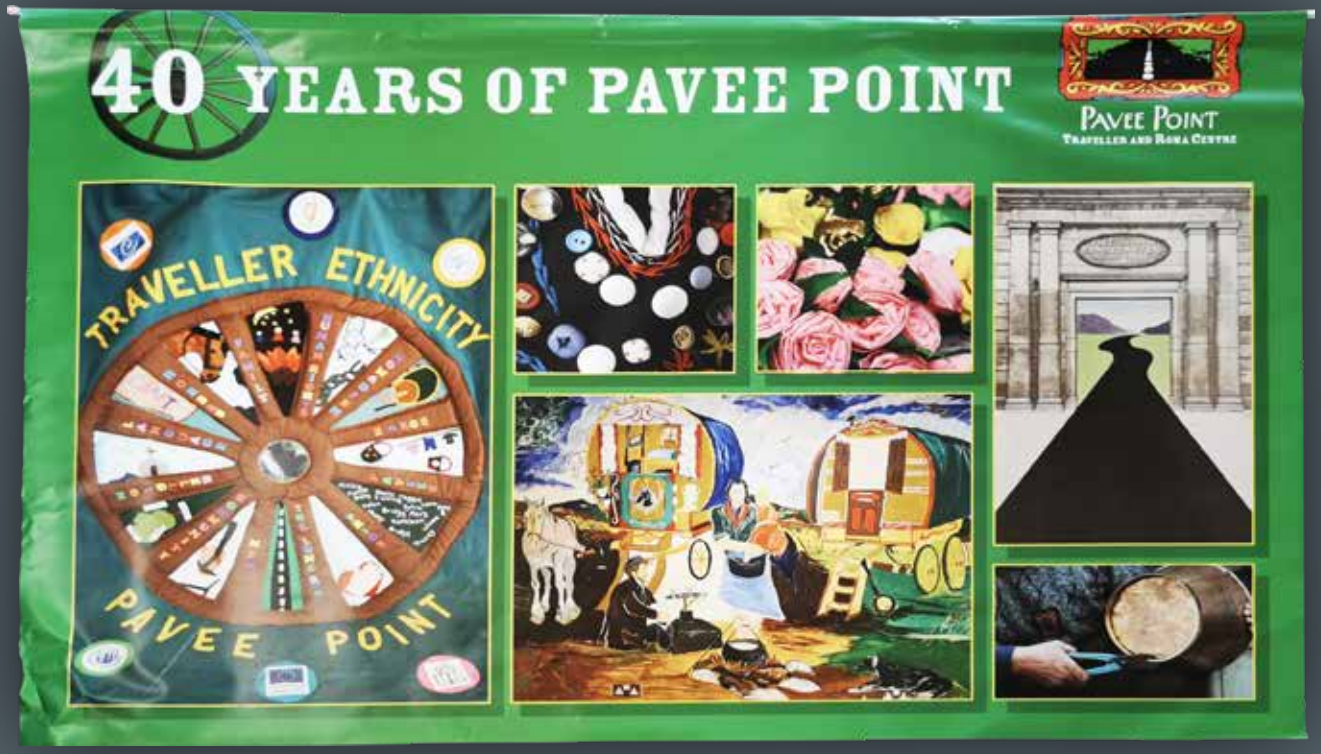
Recent years have seen a developing momentum in terms of Travellers and arts and culture in Ireland. There are many positive things happening around the country and it is in this context that Pavee Point wanted to bring Travellers together to discuss how things need to develop going forward. The conference also attracted people in arts institutions and organisations and others working with Travellers.

The specific aims of this event were to:
- promote Traveller human rights, cultural action and anti-racism within the arts
- give visibility and validation to Traveller contributions to the arts in Ireland
- start to develop a framework for promoting improved Traveller participation in the arts

It was significant on the day that we experienced poetry, film and music created and produced by Travellers while also discussing important issues for the community. The conference took place on the eve of the opening of Bafushia at the Hugh Lane – an exhibition of Traveller contemporary art - and people from the conference were able to get a preview of this exhibition.

Discussions were lively with a high level of analysis and engagement and it was great to see key themes emerge such as the need for collaborative spaces, networks and sustainable funding.

Thank you to everyone who attended the conference and gave of their time and energy. The event was organised in partnership with The Arts Council as part of Pavee Point's Arts and Culture Programme work.



Welcome and Opening Remarks

Martin Collins, Co Director, Pavee Point Traveller & Roma Centre

Pavees, Minceirs, Travellers, country people , settled people and all those who don't identify with any of those categories – you're all very welcome to Pavee Point Traveller & Roma Centre.

Pavee Point and many other Traveller organisations have been working on, and advocating for, increased Traveller inclusion and visibility in the arts at all levels and in all capacities over many years. This is the ambition – not just from Pavee Point but all the Traveller organisations.



Artistic and creative expression has always been a part of Traveller life and who we are as a people - going back hundreds and hundreds of years. We've always had people with creative talents - our singers, musicians, poets our tinsmiths, wagon makers, beady pocket makers. That is creativity. That is art – although we might not have used the term 'artistic' in the past. It's important that we do acknowledge we have very creative people that today we call artists.

Artistic expression has an important contribution to make to the preservation and visibility of our collective memories and our cultural heritage. The arts and creative expression is a powerful medium to highlight issues such as discrimination, inequality and hate speech and it plays an important role in fostering meaningful conversations about the collective experience of Travellers in terms of racism, social exclusion and inequality.

We also know that cultural identity benefits pride, confidence and resilience. And that's essential. This is what the ambition or aim is. It's about instilling, not just visibility and participation in the arts, but as a direct result of that there are other benefits such as pride, confidence and resilience. I think at the end of the day it's about Travellers, as an indigenous ethnic group on the island, taking back control over the process of the documenting and preserving and interpreting our cultural identity and our collective memory and experience.

To promote and advocate and sustain our work in this area we need accessible, sustainable funding for Traveller organisations who are doing really interesting and innovative work in the arts sector.

We need to adopt both mainstreaming and targeted approaches to support Traveller inclusion and participation in the arts. Mainstreaming will not happen of itself unless we have the complementary targeted approaches.

We need to support budding artists in our community. We need to ensure that we don't mirror or model what has been happening in the settled community where we have an elite cohort of artists.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Blue Tar Road by Helen Hutchinson

Helen Hutchinson is a Traveller poet based in Tipperary. Helen was one of the people who took part in the first Dublin Traveller Education and Development Group (later Pavee Point) training course in 1985. In the intervening years Helen has been a very strong advocate and activist in promoting Traveller rights through a whole range of manifestations including her poetry.

Helen's poetry has been recorded and two editions of her collection 'From the Dirt Lane to the Open Roads have been published. In December 2024 Helen also edited the literary pamphlet 'Trumpet' published by Poetry Ireland.

"Forty years is a long time since the first meeting at Dublin Traveller Education and Development Group," said Helen. "If it wasn't through DTEDG and education that they gave us we wouldn't be where we are now. When I say 'they' I mean other Travellers. People might be under the perception that we were learning from settled people no - we were learning from each other. It was a shared history and we did a lot in that time. I'd like to remember John O Connell and Ronnie Fay. "

The Blue Tar Road

The trees laden with leaves, sun beaming down scorching
The blue tar roads again. The birds singing, nature at play,
But not a Travellers's wagon in sight. No one there to worship
This beautiful summer day. Long ago wagons would trail
Down the byroads. What harm were we doing?

Why were we forced to change and to integrate, only knowing
Now it was to assimilate. Crucified for our way of life, our traditions
Taken away by the law – go deeper, go deeper – by them
The ones at the top, them who made the laws, them who appointed
Judges and who control our society they know nothing about.

A people within ourselves and no wonder we never mixed,
no wonder we are a suspicious people, we have a right to be.
Not many must enter within us as they only want to destroy us.
No trust in them, no wonder. No wonder as I dive into my roots
There were trees, the wildflowers, the wasteland no one wanted anyway.

It wasn't of any use to you, but it was our home. Boulders
Taking up the space now, ugly stones instead of colourful people.
Society's mortal sin hidden by guilt through what are now called halting sites,
Concrete jungles, ghettoes, concentration camps, high walls.
Really, must ye hide yer shame?

A people punished for being who we are: Travellers,
Irish people born and bred in this isle, look at our names
From O'Connor to Casey, to McCarthy to Joyce.
We trace back to Brehon law times.
Our future is ours to map, not yours to decree.


ETHNICITY
POINT
PAVEE POINT

Rosaleen McDonagh in conversation with Delaine Le Bas



Rosaleen McDonagh
Rosaleen McDonagh is a Traveller woman with a disability originally from Sligo who is an author and playwright. Rosaleen's work includes Mainstream, The Baby Doll Project, Stuck, She's Not Mine, Walls and Windows, Rings and Contentious Spaces as well as the book of essays 'Unsettled'. Rosaleen is currently under Commission from the Abbey Theatre, she is writing an adaptation of Ibsen's Dolls House and is also working on two books for Skein Press.

Rosaleen was appointed to The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in May 2020, where she is the chair of the Disability Advisory Committee and was recently appointed to the board of the The Arts Council. She is also a member of Aos Dána, the affiliation of creative artists in Ireland, and a previous and valued Board member at Pavee Point.

Rosaleen has a BA in Biblical & Theological Studies, an MPhil in Ethnic & Racial Studies and an MPhil in Creative Writing, all from Trinity College Dublin, and a PhD from Northumbria University.

Delaine Le Bas
Delaine Le Bas is a UK Romani artist. She studied Fashion & Textiles at St Martins School of Art London and has been a practicing artist since.



Delaine's work combines images, performances and words to create an artistic experience that encompasses all areas of life. In her works she deals with many areas, political as well as private and emotional, some of which involve belonging to the Romani people, their history and rich cultural heritage.

She has exhibited nationally and internationally. In 2024 she was nominated for the Turner Prize for her presentation *Incipit Vita Nova* and an exhibition of the work of the 4 nominated artists took place at the Tate Britain London.

Rosaleen: The Turner Prize is a very prestigious award and I feel it's an honour to have you here with us in Dublin and Pavee Point.

Thank you to Pavee Point , thank you all for turning out today. We had dinner last night and we said we were going to get down and dirty. Traveller women as artists and women of a certain age – we're invisible. Have you experienced that?

Delaine: Well, I think we all experience it as we're highly visible in one way and completely invisible in another way. I've just done this piece of work - it's an embroidery it's in a show– My invisibility has been made visible by your indifference.

And that is because many people have known about my work but many people have also tried to hide it. And I'm really aware of that. It's a bit like racism.

It's very difficult for me to explain to people – that the day I started school I felt it. And feeling it and seeing it from a different position. Because of the way I look. People think I can't feel it. They don't have to say anything but it's visible to me.

And that indifference from them has made my invisibility visible – because other people have seen that and other people support me in my invisibililty. And as you can see now I am 60 this year and I am pretty visible. And now that I am visible – I'm not going away either.

So, you know my visibility just isn't in my work it's also in what I say and I'm prepared to say things other people aren't prepared to say and as an artist – I can do that. It's visibility and I think it's important that we use that.

Rosaleen: I don't feel invisible but I do feel that people see one thing and one thing only. And it gives them a licence to be racist because they don't think I'm going to respond.

I wanted to ask you about your childhood. What were you like as a young girl?

Delaine: I think I was a pain. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother. My nan taught herself to read and write. She thought it was really important for us to have a space. So, the one thing that she did was create a space for me to be able to be myself. I'm also not afraid to talk about stereotypes. I'm the eldest of five and I was a girl so there was the expectation that I would stay at home and look after someone else or marry someone that my parents probably wanted me to marry. And I wasn't going to do either of those. From a very early age I had in my head that I was going to do something else. So, I applied to art school.

I did get married early. I met Damian (Le Bas) at art school – we were both at art school. We shouldn't have been there. He got thrown out of school when he was 15.



Rosaleen: Did your family know about the relationship? Did they agree with the marriage?

Delaine: Of course not.

As soon as they found out that Damian was an Irish Traveller there was a lot of conflict around that. And I was like this is who I want to marry so tough luck. I was already at art school (when we married) so I had my son Damian when I was in art school. He used to come into college with me, believe it or not.

Even though I had my son when I was at my local art school I was determined to go to St. Martins (London) so I still managed to get my place.

So, St. Martins was originally on Charing Cross Road and St. Martins School of Art when I went there in the 1980s - if you wanted to do anything to do with fashion it was the place to go to. I did the MA and on the textiles course there was only 3 places so it was highly competitive – not just from a UK perspective but from an international perspective.

Rosaleen: I know when I was going to college I didn't tell my parents what I was doing. How did you get away with what you were doing? We're the same generation and that would have been very hard for Traveller girls – whether they were married or single. How did you keep going?

Delaine: It was difficult. My Dad was really strict. So, when I was first at the college if there was a party – he'd say you can go for an hour and then I'm going to go and pick you up. So, it was either not go or make sure I was waiting outside when he got there cos if I wasn't waiting outside then he'd come in and get me. So, it wasn't easy.

Rosaleen: So, I guess what I'm trying to press and you can tell me to stop but that for young Traveller women who are doing things - some families still have the reins and they hold them back. But there's always a way of maneuvering and pushing forward.

Now I want to ask you something else. Women – Talk to me about being a Romani woman visual artist – how is it different from being a man?

Delaine: I went to art school really because of punk. I was too young to be involved and also I wasn't allowed to go out but I would listen to John Peel on the radio and what really appealed to me was Poly Styrene from Xray Spex - the lyrics in her songs . The first time I heard them – " Identity is a crisis can't you see. Identity Identity. When I look in the mirror do I see myself, do I see myself on the tv screen?"

Also, it wasn't just the lyrics it was what she looked like. She looked very different and she was just purely being herself and that's what I saw with a lot of other women that were involved in punk.
I was born in 1965 and the thing that made us stand out as English Travellers from other people was the way we looked – the way everyone dressed. The clothing, the jewellery. The motors everyone drove. They were all identifying markers. So, I already looked different anyway.

From an art perspective I didn't have anyone to look at. I couldn't find anything about Roma Gypsy or Traveller artists – there wasn't anything. So, I looked to Black artists – Black feminists – people like Audre Lorde like 'The masters tools will never dismantle the master's house.'

So, I've used that a lot because I just feel like if you're going to try and do something you've got to come at it from a different angle. You can't use the same tactics as everyone else does. So that was a major thing for me.

Rosaleen: I remember we moved from Sligo to Dublin. There was a radio and my father used to have RTE One – the main national broadcaster on all the time. My mother loved Patsy Cline 1950s. I remember hearing Ian Dury – Tracy Chapman in the 80s - every young person knew that song- Fast Car – Talkin' About a Revolution. Of course I love Traveller music but I know as a teenager it kind of held you back - or I thought it did. And that whole punk alternative for me as a young Traveller women with a disability that released freedom, possibility and potential.

I want to talk to you - my 20s and 30s were miserable. Everyone else was having babies and marriage I still didn't know what I was going to do – what I wanted to do. What was your 20s and 30s like?

Delaine: Well I'd already finished college. So, I went to college when I was 16 so by the time I was 21 I'd done my masters – I'd done everything. So, then we thought about going into the fashion business me and my late husband Damian – everyone wanted us to make things for less than it was costing us.

And so, in the first meeting we had with businesspeople I just told them straight – this isn't happening. If you think we're going to sell you things for less than it's costing us just because you have a name.

I said - I want to do what I want to do and if that means I've got to clean toilets or wash floors – I don't care. But I'm not going to be making stuff for other people so they can make money at our expense.

So, we made that decision – so Damian used to roofing with my Dad and my brothers and I used to do the markets. My family used to sell flowers at markets. So, we just did that and we made a definite path of the work that we wanted to make with the money we made ourselves. That meant that we met people who helped us because they understood the work and this was taking the punk thing as well. Because the work is quite confrontational at times.

One of my nicknames is the Safety Pin Queen because I use safety pins for everything. And I put the work up a lot with safety pins. And it's all transportable and as much as recyclable as possible.

In this picture (see below) – the floor I wanted to be like a punk thing. During COVID I kept the newspapers. I collect some newspapers because I've got a massive archive of stuff. I'm collecting stuff since the 80s and I blew the articles up big and we covered the floor in them.

But once the show was over- obviously it got a lot of foot fall. People spilled drinks and certain people's faces were on the newspapers that certain people took great joy in trying to kick out. We then cut the floor up so the floor is now kept as another piece of work. And all the fabric that's on the walls is re used.

Rosaleen: Tell us about your first big break as an artist

Delaine: It's difficult to say. My break – I did a solo show in 2005 at a very small space called 'Transition Gallery' at Victoria Park London. And it was an old garage, basically, that someone had converted and it was an artist run space. It wasn't a commercial gallery and the co-director was Alex Michon. And I literally took over the space. And it was called 'Room'.



Beware of Linguistic Engineering by Delaine le Bas.
Photos © Maxim Gorki Theater / Photos: Egbert Trogemann

And I took the room that I worked in the house and placed it in the space and I was there for the duration of the show and my myself and the photographer, Tara Darby, did a book. We didn't do a normal book which usually has just got the photos of the finished work in it. They spent time with me and my late husband and they photographed the work in progress. And then it also included a series of letters that I'd written to the co director of the gallery. So, it was a different sort of publication as well. It looked more like a magazine and it was more about the making of the work than the finished work.



Incipit Vita Nova by Delaine Le Bas at Secession. Photo by Iris Ranzinger. Gallery: Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix.

Rosaleen: But what I really want to get down to – that first break. I know that in my life and there is one person – for me it was a settled person and they had my back and they were pushing me forward . They were kind of challenging the racism in ways that I couldn't or wouldn't. Was there someone that supported you and that you had a really great trust in them?

Delaine: Well, there's been more than one person. There's been a few people. Christine Eyene, art historian, critic and curator, saw my work in the first Roma Pavilion in 2007 and she was also looking for something to put my work in. She knew I could expand what it was I was doing.

So, the first thing I did with Christine was in 2014 and sometimes you meet people and they're there and they're supporting you but they can't actually get something happening until a certain point. So, sometimes it's what I call a slow burner.

And sometimes I say to young artists it's a marathon – it's not a sprint. So you've got to be prepared for that as well. Also working with people at the early stages of their careers. Lots of people that I worked with and that I work with now I worked with when they were in very small organisations – and now they're really big curators in really big spaces.

Within my family I did have two great supporters – that was my Nan and one of my uncles.

Rosaleen: I'm going to get really controversial and you can tell me to stop. We've dealt with the woman and now we're going to deal with how your Roma Traveller identity influenced your work. Does it? Or is that just a by product and also do you ever feel compromised by 1. Racism 2. Family? But also are there other comprises maybe with organisations and maybe the whole thing about am I a writer first or a Traveller first.

Delaine: One of the reasons I sometimes have problems is because I won't compromise. If I've got something to say in my work I feel I've got to say it or I've got to make it. Cos often I've been given opportunities and I've thought I've got to grab this 'cos I won't be back here again. This opportunity might not happen again so I've got to make the most of this.

Also with the work, I don't have a big studio. I work from home so also the people that work with me trust me in the work but also a lot of the time they don't know what it's going to be.

Sometimes, when I get into the space something happens. I sometimes get asked to do a talk and they want the slides and sometimes what I'm going to say beforehand and I can't do that 'cos something might happen.

The slides probably come up there but the character that I created … was this character that was saying everything as well. So through my performance I'm even more confrontational. I'll even ask people what they're doing at the performance. Why are you here? What have you come to do? What do you want from me?

We all know that when you come from a certain place there is a lot of extraction. People always want to take from you. So, I've done performances in dance studios where everyone's got to look at the mirror everyone's got to look at themselves – so that's what that room is in that slide there. The reflection room is about having to look at yourself as well. It's about the people who are coming they've also got to deal with themselves. I mean with my work what are they expecting to see when they come into it? You can read all the stuff about me. And it's important that the stuff about my background is there but as soon they read that there's an expectation of what they're going to see. There's an expectation when they meet of whom I going to be.

And I will not .. I am not going to fulfill what they think I should be. Cos I am me and you are you and we are all individuals. So, also it doesn't matter where we come from. We're also individual beings as well and that has to be taken into consideration. And I think very often it's not.



Rosaleen: I'm getting all sorts of hand signals to hurry up. I will open it up in a minute but there are two or three more questions that are really important to me. One is in the current climate – we're only two days after the 80th anniversary of the Holocaust where gay people, disabled people, Roma and Sinti and Jewish people were murdered. And with the rise of fascism and we've had a far right movement grow really rapidly over the last few years and now we have Trump back running the world – what would you say to young Traveller and Roma people . Apart from 'be not afraid' – but what else would you say in the current climate?

Delaine: I would say that one of the reasons we're sitting here today is that we are resilient and we've survived. I've got a t-shirt in my latest show and it's a phrase my friend said and it is 'Survival is the Ultimate Revenge'. So just to survive and to be able to do what you do. And this is why I won't compromise on the work. It's really important if you've got something to say that you say it. We only get one chance at this.

You know I say in the film for Tate (Britain) – Do it now and also do it now cos we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. So, I think that's what I would say. If you want to make something make it. If you want to do something try as hard as you can to – sometimes in the process of doing it you will meet people who will help you on that path as well. Because sometimes by putting that foot out – there is someone else there to go along the path with you.

Rosaleen: I would say that in moments of crisis and great danger we are at our best – that's when our music , our art , our activism, our solidarity comes into being. And around the 1980s for me as a Traveller child – the boulders. Remember the boulders? The big stones. In those moments of crisis that's when activism gets rejuvenated because another generation becomes politicised and radicalised and yes I said radicalised.



I'm going to open to the floor – but it was a great pleasure. Please come back to Dublin, come back to Pavee.

Question 1: My name is Vanessa. I work on the Roma education team in Pavee Point . I just wanted to ask because in my work I come across a lot of young Roma who are very artistic and very creative and they find it very hard to express themselves in an area they feel so unrepresented and so unseen in these spaces.

Delaine: This was my plan – any space that I could find or anyone that offered me a space I would do a show even it if was only for one day. Even if it meant I'd to get the stuff, put it in a van, drive it somewhere, put it up, have an opening that night and then take it down afterwards and drive all the way home - that's what I would do 'cos I said in the end they won't be able to ignore me. I will be in so many places, so many times, doing so many things with so many people - it will build and build and build. And actually it's paid off and that's what happened.

And you meet other people and they support your work and they put your name out there. They put your work forward so it works in manifold ways. Because you have to create the space. Because if someone's not going to give you the space you have to create the space it yourself. And that's where the resilience comes in. You put that block there I'm just going to go around it. It's not going to stop me.

Question 2: My question is for Rosaleen – I'm curious there's a lot of talk about Travellers in the arts – and we've always been a creative people always - whether we put that label on ourselves or not. I know you certainly have been in the public domain. My question is this - do you find or have you found at any point in your journey that it's been a lonely experience in terms of being an Irish Traveller - in particular in terms of being a creative, in terms of getting spaces where we can collaborate get together?

Rosaleen: I'm not sure I suppose the very nature of my art is solitary. I'm a writer . It's only at the stage of production I go into collaboration. All through my career I didn't always have money to do it. I would try Traveller researchers, Traveller actors, Traveller editors and that's all I can do. I can't bear the burden of responsibility. Delaine - I'm sure that you'd agree to build a career is a very hard job, a very hard job.

A lot of time I'm sad to say Travellers didn't want to work with me. And you know what I'm talking about as a woman - as a single woman it was like don't go near her. People would say you're not a right Traveller and in a way although it hurt it also allowed me to go under the radar. I'll do what I want. But now as a Traveller I will always pick a Traveller or a disabled person to work with before anyone else. Is that wrong - probably, but that's who I am.



Question 3: How can we ensure that our own artists and creatives don't become complicit in the stereotyping or exploitation?

Rosaleen: First of all, you've to allow people to make mistakes. I've made them. I've collaborated with the wrong people. I also think young Traveller artists they have the right to do whatever they want - to be political or whether they want to be exploited. They have their own journey. You can't say that's wrong. That's how they grow their art.

I know when I wrote that poem 'I Am Not Your Knacker' for me it was complete liberation – it was all the shit things that happened to us collectively and individually and after I did that poem I don't care if I never write again but for me that was my response.

Question 4: I went back to education and you're always told when you go outside that norm that you're not the right Traveller and you're breaking traditions in your whole community and it can be a lonely place and an isolating place. How can we overcome that?

Delaine: I think I realised that when I went to school from when I was 5, I just sort of got used to it and I've used it to my advantage in a way and it meant that people that I do work with, who I can trust have been on that journey with me. The people that I generally work with - we have a long-term relationship and it means we can trust each other.


Traveller Domestic, Sexual
and Gender-based Violence
(DSGBV) Project

Breakout Groups

After an inspiring conversation between Delaine Le Bas and Rosaleen McDonagh people split into smaller groups. Each group was made up of 20 people and spent approximately an hour discussing 'Travellers in the Arts- Challenges and Opportunities'. We give here a summary of the themes that came up.

Experiences in the Arts

- Traveller actors expected to play Traveller roles only.
- Not enough space to move from being a 'participant' to a 'co creator'. Hard to move forward.
- Projects being designed by people who don't understand. Funding processes and governance designed without any Traveller input.
- Just little bits of funding available. Can't plan ahead properly.
- There is a feeling from some Traveller artists that they are not trusted to deliver projects.
- There is intrinsic creativity, collaboration and intergenerational component and aesthetic within Traveller culture. People need to understand that and recognise it more.
- Difficult to get young Traveller men involved in art projects. Some children are talented but are embarrassed in front of their peers.
- Notion in the settled community that there can only be one Traveller singer, one Traveller painter, one Traveller writer. This does not help more Traveller artists to be visible and known within wider Irish society.
- Culture fatigue among Travellers. You are seen as if you're only identity is Traveller. You are pigeon-holed to engage in only Traveller arts, sing only Traveller songs.
- Many artistic pursuits such as storytelling and music are not given the recognition they deserve, both within and outside of the community.
- Having a mentor was a huge help for me in structuring my poetry and coaching was crucial in the development of my work.
- A significant barrier to participation in the arts is the lack of information regarding publication and advertising of work. It was difficult to take next steps after initial artistic production.
- Artistic activity and motivation is undermined by dismissive attitudes within the community, much of which is formed from internalized lack of self-worth resulting from discrimination.
- There remains a lack of pathways and information on available programs and supports to artists and art projects.

Measures to be taken

- Sustainable and mainstreamed funding for Traveller arts and Traveller artists.
- Traveller led and co-designed initiatives that are multi-annual.
- Funding should not be provided on the basis of projects, but rather should be part of current expenditure.
- Bespoke artist support is needed for Traveller artists. Not just a bursary but research needed into bespoke artist support for Travellers. It's about mainstream and strategic measures.
- Need collaboration spaces and supports.
- Need to create networks of artists to help people understand the funding process and how to succeed in the industry.
- Need allies and advocates from the arts sector.
- Traveller leadership in the arts sector needs to be supported.
- Possible regional networks with reps from Traveller organisations, Arts Council and local authority reps.
- We need to encourage young people – using arts and creativity. They don't realise that the arts are for Travellers or what art is. Need to build their confidence and remove barriers for young people.
- Platforms to showcase art and access mainstream venues.
- Accessible and clear information for Travellers on funding and other opportunities.
- Travellers should be involved in working groups and decision making and have input into what the needs and challenges are.
- Need for agents and those involved at a high level in the arts to create spaces and opportunities for Travellers to include employment opportunities.
- The Education System has a role to support Travellers engaging in the arts.
- Internship programme in various art institutions – Arts Council, RTE, Abbey Theatre.
- Mentorship programmes for Travellers.






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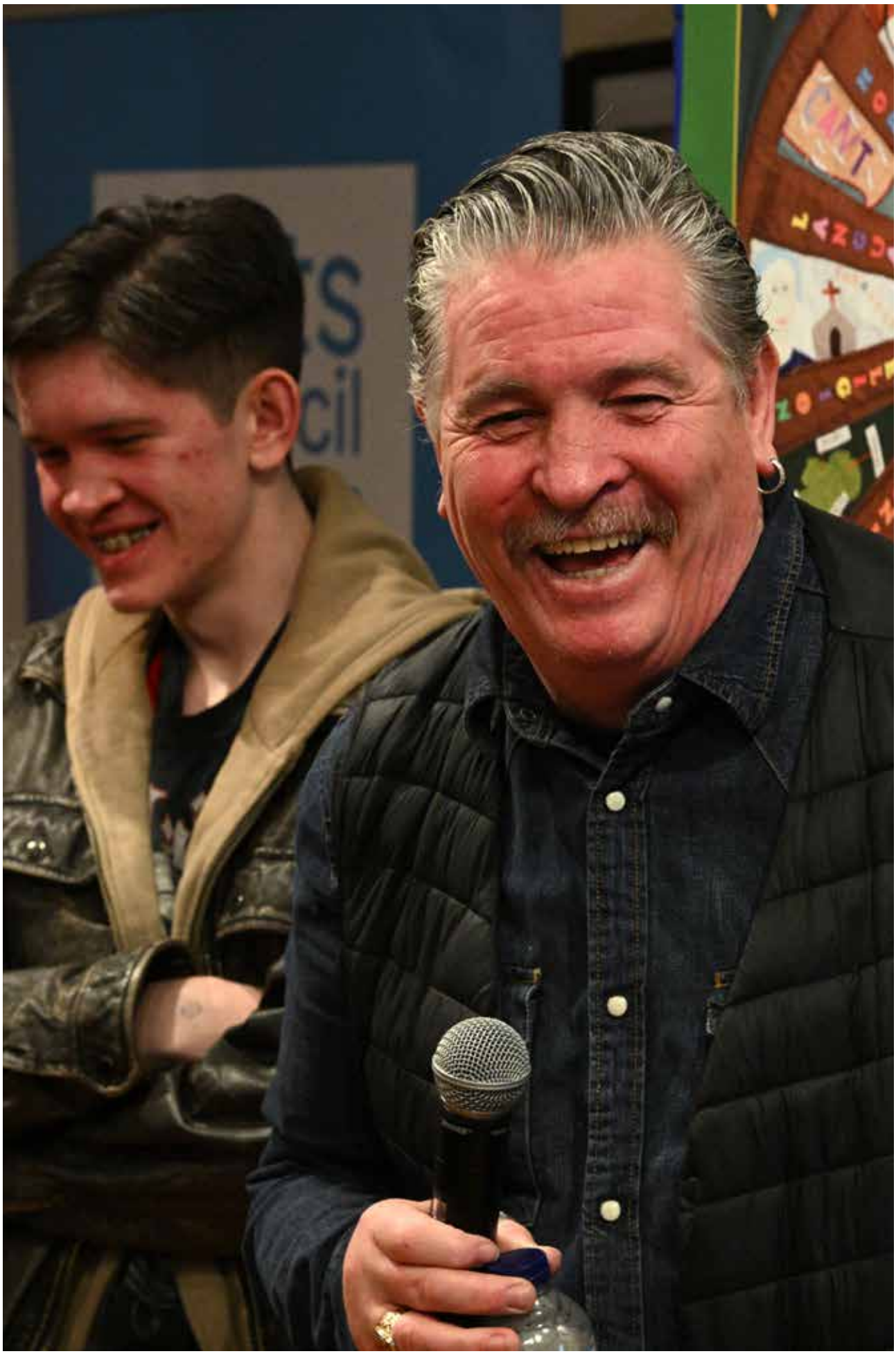


Martin Collins introduces Michael Collins and Michael's son Johnny Collins

I regard Michael to be from the class of 1985 Dublin Traveller Education Development Group Meath Street. We both started that training on the very same day. That's where his acting and doing different sketches and drama began. And over the intervening years Michael has produced many plays he has written himself and he has acted in them.

A lot if not all Michael's plays reflect contemporary very key challenging issues in the community dealing with mental health, suicide, feuding sensitive issues, really important issues - racism, identity, culture.

Earlier on people made references to role models and trail blazers. People must remember that back in 1985 acting was a very lonely place and Michael was a trail blazer and paved the path for many other actors and writers and people that we have in this room today and others who couldn' t make it here today. Johnny is cutting his teeth into the acting business as well and essentially beginning out and we wish him well in that.

Johnny Collins: The only place to start is at the start. Did you face many barriers when you started?

Michael Collins: I would have started into the acting over 40 years ago – what some people would know and a lot wouldn't is that most of my family and cousins and relations we ended up in a special school for Travellers in Finglas. It was at the back of the girls national school and there was a wooden hut in the back for Travellers only and we would have left school after we made our confirmation either to pick spuds or do the dump. So I'd even go as far as saying that up to 95% of the people that went to school with me left school without being able to read or write and that was one of the biggest barriers for me when I wanted to take up the acting.

I think the way we started off in Dublin Traveller Education & Development Group with John O'Connell and Ronnie Fay - when we used to go to meet with some of the politicians and city councillors and most of us couldn't read very well - so we'd act out scenes about why we need this type of accommodation or what way the discrimination affected us. And that's where the acting started from.

And then this young writer came in who was Anton O Flatharta – who was a playwright who wrote in Irish. And he wanted to write an English play and he wanted to write about Travellers and he wanted to get it right. So, he cast a group of professional actors and then came into meet myself and John O Connell and a group of younger Travellers and they asked us to improvise with the professional actors and we did.

And he must have seen something in me and he asked me would I play one of the characters and I said yes. But I said it without thinking that I would be travelling around the country for six months with a group of settled people who I didn't know.

My family was getting evicted off the Navan Road so I didn't know if I was going to have a home when I got back.

And I think one of the hardest things for me at the time was we performed for 5th or 6th years in

It was very difficult at the time. People didn't understand the writing or what acting was about.

And how vulnerable you can be out in society as a young member of the Traveller community.

the school system and there was never any Travellers there cos all the Travellers left after their confirmation.

And we did the show and then we did a workshop after it and the things they were saying about Travellers physically made me sick. These were children that their parents ran the businesses in the town, the shops, they ran taxis, they ran buses. Some of them were schoolteachers. And the things they said about Travellers were said so freely that it made me hurt. One of the hardest barriers was dealing with what people were thinking and what they thought about Travellers.

Johnny - Did you have much support?

Michael Collins: At that time, when I got the part in Glenroe, I would have been the only Traveller actor at the time. I suppose some of the actors would have supported me and some are still very good friends of mine. But in mainline support – no not really.

It was very difficult at the time. People didn't understand what you were doing. People didn't understand the writing or what acting was about. And how vulnerable you can be out in society as a young member of the Travelling community.

One agent had me down as "genuine Traveller' which I didn't know nothing about. So when I got the phone call from a friend who said you know your agent has you down as 'genuine Traveller' - bells started going off everywhere. There was these types of things.

I remember going for an audition and it was an English casting director and she didn't know nothing about Travellers and I went for the audition and she said you're brilliant will you come back again. And I went back again and she said oh you're even better now. I think after the third time she said would you like to meet the director – the director would like to meet you. But the

things he'd be saying was - you would be very suitable for the part but would you be reliable? Would you turn up for work? Do you drink much?

Then I got a call from a friend of mine to ask how I got on in the audition and I said he was asking me these very strange questions. And he said Michael the reason he was asking you because he knew you were a Traveller that was the only reason because nobody else would be asked questions like that. So, I knew how real it was and the support didn't come along until a couple of years later when I started writing my own stuff – that's when the support came along.

Johnny Collins - You touched off it but what were some of the big turning points?

Michael Collins: I suppose one of the biggest turning points was getting a part in a play written by Brian McMahon which was called The Honeyspike. And that show was very successful and went very well. But the interesting thing was that when I met the American director I convinced her to use real Travellers as the extras on stage. And that was one of the highlights of an actor at the time that somebody said I think this could work and it worked absolutely brilliant.

And we've been using Travellers as extras in Glenroe and any film I've ever done we've always used real Travellers as extras. I think it's very important that we include the Traveller community especially when we're doing films to promote Travellers. Particularly when we got the part in Glenroe – we were introducing Travellers to people all over the country and it gave Travellers that bit of a higher profile but it also gave me a platform to use to take on issues like Travellers getting refused out of pubs and going on protests and things like that. People knew who I was and they'd come looking for your comment and stuff like that. So, they were the big highlights. And I suppose making – and I know some people like the film and some don't - King of the Travellers, Pavee



Lackeen, Strength and Honour – and all those films came along where Travellers were introduced as real characters the characters were getting played by a real Traveller. And every one of them let them be big or small – was big achievement for me.

Johnny - And how did your identity as a Traveller impact your work?

Michael Collins: For years, because of Glenroe I suppose, I was typecast as a Traveller for years and years. And I think I still am. So that impacted. Now I didn't mind - once I was working and I was playing a Traveller I didn't mind. But I was told no you couldn't go for the audition for The Commitments because there was no Traveller characters in it. I was like hold on a second – I'm an actor from the Traveller community. It shouldn't make a difference who you are. Well of course that barrier was always there.

I think that has been changing in the last couple of years because you have these young writers, young actors and young directors and they don't care where you're from. Once you can do the job. They'll take you on.

But I think one of the biggest achievements to date is that Film Ireland has funded a feature film that I wrote called Worlds Apart. And it's the first time in the history of Irish film that they funded a Traveller writer for a film. And they gave us a good budget and we're hoping to do it next year. So that's great. So, there's something moving.

Johnny - and so then can I ask – what's your vision of the future and what do you think needs to happen to bring about these improvements?

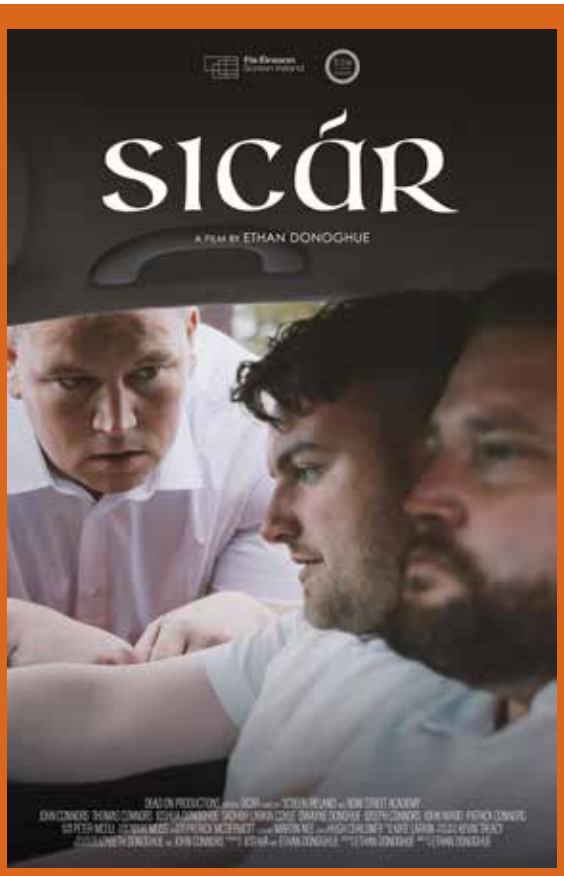
Michael Collins: My vision for the future Johnny as you know is promoting Travellers through the arts – it doesn't matter what platform. Let them be singers, writers, storytellers or poets. Johnny now is a lovely poet. We've Helen Hutchinson. We've the Donoghue boys here doing films. We've people who can sing we have people who can dance.



What I'd love to see for the future is a space that Travellers can use to promote the work. They could use that space to work on or to use that space to rehearse in or meet writers or directors and have courses.

And even back stage work. I know some Travellers don't like acting. That doesn't mean they can't do the lights and the sound. Jim Boy Reilly came one time. Mick Rafferty and Patricia were a great help to me over the years and were my biggest supporters of all time and I would like to thank them again as I know Mick is not well at the moment. And one of the things was when Mick said he was retiring we got Jim Boy Reilly in. He was a young man – ah he's as old as myself anyway we're married to two sisters – and we put him into the box with Mick and he was watching Mick for two days and he got it.

So, there is opportunities out there. I mean myself and Johnny and Jim Boy and were in the Dublin Arts Festival and it was the first time in the history of the Dublin Arts Festival where you had a Traveller show – acted by Travellers, where the lights and sound was done by Travellers the show was written by a Traveller. That to me is a huge achievement. And I think if I can do it anybody can do it. I think that's the way we need to be seeing things and moving up. So, I think the most important thing is funding and our own space for the future.







During the lunch break there was a screening of the film Sicár by Dead On Productions. It was written and directed by Ethan Donoghue, produced by Ethan and Joshua Donoghue and stars John Connors, Joshua Donoghue, Thomas Connors, Patrick Connors and Sadhbh Larkin Coyle.



Trish Reilly - singer, songwriter and activist

Panel Discussion



Panel Chairperson: Leon Diop - Head of Diversity and Inclusion, The Arts Council

Introduction

Thank you for having us here today. It's been really interesting getting to hear the experiences, the thoughts and ultimately how we can all move forward together. Events and talks like these require a lot of trust so I just want to say thanks for putting trust in us.

We understand there are a lot of barriers and difficulties to engage with the arts but you're still doing it and amazing art work is being created. Some of which we've gotten to see today. And days like this – we need to continue to have days like this where we meet together, where we have conversations, where we bridge gaps.

The cultural gap is beginning to be better connected. I hope we're decreasing that gap that was there culturally in terms of having a better understanding of Traveller culture and Traveller community so that we can best serve. We also recognise there is a systemic gap there also that we need to work on and we need to bridge. Days like these are bridging that gap. So thanks for that.

Tell us about your journey and your art practice.



Martin Beanz Warde - Comedian, journalist, playwright, photographer

Travellers we diversify a lot. If you want to ask about stand-up comedy that started back in 2005 with the tv show called 'Des Bishop Joins the Hood'. I had no ambition to be a comedian. At that time I was very politically minded and the headline in the paper said – Bishop to make Laughing Stock of Travellers – I didn't get beyond the heading.

So, I went down to Bishop and I ended up sitting in and we had a conversation and I was asked to fill out a questionnaire. And there was one answer in that questionnaire that got me chosen for this tv show. And the question was what's your favourite instrument. And I said the cello. And they thought it was so outlandish that a Traveller would choose a cello. Maybe because they thought you couldn't fit one into a caravan – in their mind. It was so outlandish a cello and that's why I was chosen.

Theatre came at a time when the whole country was in lockdown. It was COVID. I had all my eggs in the one basket. I'd finished a degree in sociology and politics. Like most people do after degrees

I always wanted to write a play. I'd never seen a play but I'd read them in school.

- you don't end up working with that degree. So I wanted to pursue the comedy. And for the first time in my life I was going to earn a living that year.

And then COVID came and evaporated it all. I've been writing since I was 11 and I've over 1,000 poems since I was a child. And I found that writing was my means of expression.

COVID started to come in 2020. My granny passed away before my birthday in February 2020 and before she passed away she went into hospital in the October. And she ended up not coming out of hospital . But before that I had saved up enough money to buy cameras to record her stories – her life story and I never got the chance.

So afterwards I wrote a column for the Dublin Inquirer about my granny and because of the way I wrote it the Irish Times read that and asked if they could reprint it. And that led on to being asked to write other columns. And that led on to the Irish Examiner asking me to write for them. And then I was saying this whole writing craic is not too bad.

I always wanted to write a play. I'd never seen a play but I'd read them in school – Shakespeare. The 3 act set up. That's a perfect construct for the arc in a typical Traveller life and there's so much of our culture and history and heritage that never gets transposed into actual theatre. It's usually performed by people who will never have to understand what it's like to be discriminated against, or who will know that fear you have before you go out on a night out. It's not do you think is this pub going to be great? It's - is this pub going to let us in?

So, with that in mind with the emotionality that goes into the writing – that led into me writing my first play. And I didn't get that until I put up a very bitchy horrible tweet. It's great now that the feminists are awake – do you think they might be intersectional and include us Travellers.

I had gotten refused from 51 different venues to perform because I was a Traveller. And I'm listening to all my feminist friends talking about intersectionality how it includes everyone and how it's good for men also.

At the time, I was that vulnerable person trying to find themselves and the response I got back was - We'd gladly help you if we'd known that you needed it. And I never asked and that was the lightbulb moment for me. Here was this other community. Here's this other community that's looking to include everyone but because of either being on social media or because of growing up being oppressed and not thinking that you belong anywhere - you're looking at other people in their struggles and fighting for their justified rights. You're thinking what about us? And that 'what about us thing' created the play for me. And it was because I was invited in. I was told you can.

And, in actual fact there's funding out there. There's a whole thing called The Arts Council where you can apply for funding. I was like what! The Traveller in me was ignited and I was thinking hold on a second why haven't other Travellers being doing this before.

So you asked me at the start where did it all begin. It all began when I was born. I grew up in a family that was denied stuff and as I got into Irish society – and I saw others doing well and I asked the question and I begged people to help me. It was a feminist that answered and it was a feminist that showed me – no matter what happened in the first part of your life - the rest of your life you're part of this community and that's the arts community.

That's my 3 acts. I haven't got to the final act yet but in the second act of my life play is me discovering that theatre is where my heart lies. It's a whole different ball game. I only started in 2020 and I'd never seen a play. My first introduction to a play I was given a free ticket by Willie White, who is my mentor into the world of theatre. And I said Willie I've never seen a play and I've nearly finished mine. And he said – "I've got the perfect one for you to see."

And there I am in the front row of the audience and within the first 30 seconds there were two people stark naked on the stage. 'Conversations After Sex' was the name of the play. I remember taking the phone and going like this - cheers Willie. But I ain't doing that.

I will also say that seeing two people being the most vulnerable they could be in front of a crowd of strangers told me that no matter what I was going to do in my play you have the strength to do it. And if people like that can literally lay themselves bare you can lay your emotions bare. And that's the one thing if any Traveller is thinking of writing take that with you – everyone has a story. Put all the vulnerabilities on the page. Put everything that you can on the page and show your emotionality because that's what great theatre is for me. With my play 'The Dead House' I did a 50 night run for the Dublin Theatre Festival.



Nora Corcoran – writer and Artistic Director Misleor Festival, Galway Traveller Movement

My journey began a long time ago. I come from a very big family- family of 14 not including me. We were assimilated. I grew up in a two up, two down house.

My father's a tinsmith and I come from a very rich Traveller heritage. And obviously back when I was small in the 70s we didn't really have much around. Entertainment was telling stories. My mother was a storyteller. She was a natural storyteller. And she'd bring us upstairs to this one room and there were 5 or 6 beds and she'd tell us stories. And I just wish now that we got the opportunity to archive those stories. And I love when it is being archived because the stories that Traveller women tell - you don't see them. They're just different. They're from another parallel world that no non-Traveller writer could write. I know that's the truth. And I know any Traveller here who had that experience would agree with me. And that's not to be critical of any one's stories but these are different.

Growing up in a big family I was always in my mind. You create this other world for yourself and trying to find this safe space. And sometimes being a Traveller wasn't a safe space. But education was always my passion. My parents couldn't read or write but it didn't stop us having an education.

Most of my family didn't stay on in school but I stayed until I could. I got married and I went back to education later on in years.

My father used to tell stories as well. He'd tell stories about his life and he was always the hero. No matter where he was - over in England building the roads - or if he was building the buildings the gaffer would make him supervisor. What stood out for me he was always the hero.

I was lucky enough to start working with Galway Traveller Movement in 2019 and the first Misleor Festival of Nomadic Cultures was over. I missed the first one. We had COVID then and the festival went online.

Then when I went back I was lucky enough to be offered the role of co-artistic director. And I had started writing stories and I'd look around and I never saw a Traveller child that's the hero in storybooks. That started me out on the journey to start writing.

I'm not going to say that I'm totally artistic – but there was always that political bit. It's not fair there's no Traveller child in storybooks and I reached out to a lot of publishers and sure none of them for a long time was interested. But then one did get back to me and I might start working with them this year.

I write poetry as well and all of my poetry is based on my life as a Traveller woman, as a Traveller child. It's based on my memories going down the road with my father and him making the buckets and my mother putting down the patterns. And if anyone doesn't know what a pattern is it's something you put on the ground. And she'd be doing the houses – geggin the cenyas – as she'd said and I'd ask her what are you doing. What are you putting on the ground and she said that's for your father so he'll know where to find us.

So that's one of my stories and one of my abiding memories of my parents. And that's very emotional for me. Some of my poetry is about racism and discrimination that we face as Travellers and I like to put that in to my poetry. Misleor is so special to me and we bring all the nomadic cultures together and last year we had Damian Le Bas - a fantastic poet. We had Joshua (Donoghue) and Martin (Beanz Warde) and Michael (Collins). We bring people to Misleor to that safe creative space so that we can challenge racism and discrimination. We do it through the creative lens and what that does – when you're in that space you're not just nomadic, you're not just Traveller you're all together as artists. You're there together appreciating that talent. We're all together and we all have the one goal. Share that talent. And remember no matter when you go if I have that talent I should be able to share it. That's my journey.



Trish Reilly - singer, songwriter, activist

I'm Trish Reilly and I'm not great at doing bios – I put a small few lines down here but I hate paperwork – so it's narrowed down to singer, songwriter. I suppose that's what I'm known for. But to me there's a bit of tapestry that makes me who I am. And one doesn't take precedence over the other.

And one is to be a Traveller activist - which I never decided to be. It's just how I feel about my situation and my experience of life and through my experience of life I have veered towards the use of creativity as a means to cope. I never decided that either.

> I never saw a Traveller child that's the hero in storybooks. That started me out on the journey to start writing.

Currently what I do I work down in Carlow and I work with The Living Artfully project. And I have to say this could actually be used as a model where we have Carlow Co Co running a Living Artfully project and we have a group of Travellers. You can deal with so many issues through the arts.

You can deal with mental health issues - you can deal with depression. I mean, this is why I am a creative. It's because I dealt with depression and anxiety and that was my saving grace.

A lot of people know that I was brought up in the care system. I was taken into the care system when I was 8 (I'm nearly 52 now) because I was a Traveller. And I blame the 1963 Report on Itinerancy narrative for that and I always will. I'm 100 per cent certain that had a huge impact on why I was taken.

But being in the care system and having nobody to talk to and actually growing up in that, which I never really speak about, was very difficult. I don't blame the nuns per se – I mean they have their own way of going on but, it was the isolation of being a Traveller among a lot of non-Travellers and being misunderstood as a person.

So, my saving grace was a blank piece of paper and at 12 years of age I'd write down everything and no one could criticise it. And it's also been an enemy - the pen and paper. And in this day and age you don't need to read and write - you can talk your voice out into a phone.

My father was a writer and he could never actually write. He wrote songs in his head. And that's how we did it. So, it shouldn't be a barrier. Rephrase this in your mind. Without the aid of a pen a paper all of the Traveller musicians who could remember 16 verses of a song in their head that's a skill without having the use of that tool to be able to do that. So, it shouldn't be a barrier.

What I'm hoping would come from this conference today. One of the things that came out of the yellow group we'll call it was about collaboration. I really feel it would be very, very important to have a space – where Traveller artists can come together. Rosaleen – you said earlier – solitary. There's a time for being in that space but there's also a time for bringing your art out and meeting other artists. Cos it can be a very lonely time.

For example, I'd meet Stephen Dunne there at a gig and we'd have about 15 minutes to talk. I'd say Jesus I'd love if you' did this over this. And you don't get this chance to collaborate. And it's very difficult. And you can't say go down to my house. Down on top of you. It would be lovely if a space was facilitated where we could draw off each other and support each other. With the option you can opt out.

I'm having my fun - I'm alright. But for the young generation coming up - to promote the current artists. No matter what their medium is. When I say artists I'm talking people who are into flower arranging. I'm talking creative people no matter what they're into. They need to know whose out there doing these things. Otherwise, they can't see themselves there.

A database of Traveller art is an excellent idea. Because people can look in and see. These people need to be able to interconnect with each other to give that sense of pride and self-esteem to the younger generation. And I really think if there was a way of getting a space where people could link in to collaborate, chat about things.

> "I mean this is why I am a creative. It's because I dealt with depression and anxiety and that was my saving grace."

Another thing - pigeon-holing Tavellers is a very dangerous thing to do. When you go into a school and talk to a group of kids – don't be saying draw a wagon, draw a tent. To 12-year-old children today, let them draw Playstation controllers. Let them do what's coming from them.

Don't be assuming because you're a Traveller that you have to be back in the day. We all want to keep the heritage going. But Traveller culture today is evolving and young people - you have to identify with what's in their heads.

People have a tendency – because my roots are traditional they say. Well - if you're not what they require - they're not interested.

I can write songs about being in love, being out of love - no one wants to hear it. You're an artist first you're an individual first. But when you're a Traveller artist you're expected to stay within the box. And I don't like being put in a box.

That's basically all I'm going to say. I did in 2016 set up a group called Irish Traveller Creative and it was because I felt that isolation of wanting the connection with my own community and of course the support of people outside of it – non Travellers. It's still important we can feel normal about being Traveller artists – we need to normalise it. The group was only online – there was none of that funding Creative Ireland. But I could see Martin Beanz Warde doing his thing and Steo Wall doing his thing. But we didn't have a space that we could put something together. It would be a great space to wander in for a couple of hours. A place where we could link in and we could all link in with one another.

For me it's what's underneath creativity. Do you turn to drugs, do you turn to drink or do you find a niche to cope with your lot in life. I just cried my tears out onto the page or sang. It wasn't about the product it was about the process. Half the time nobody sees it. It goes into the bin. But my head's

the better for it. Get it out of your nuck and onto the page. If a song comes – so be it. It's about giving the young people today another avenue.



Mags O'Sullivan - cultural worker, curator and community development outreach worker Cork Traveller Women's Network

My name is Mags O'Sullivan, community development outreach worker with the Cork Traveller Women's Network (CTWN) I'd say for about 14 or 15 years now. I'm also a Traveller Culture Awareness Trainer. My personal journey would be coming from a Traveller site. Being excluded from school as all Travellers in the room we face discrimination on a daily basis.

I suppose when I took the decision with the CTWN my art insight was spurred on from discrimination. So, when we did cultural projects they were always protest pieces. For example there was a halting site – a traditional halting site - and the Council moved the Travellers off them. And the sites would have holden a lot of memories and one art project we did was to go around to all them sites, pick up soil from all them sites, collect it and put it into a box - as a remembrance box. But also as a protest piece against the Council to say - you took this but you didn't take our history, you didn't take the songs that came from the site. The traditional campsite meant so much to us.



Also along with that we recorded all the stories relating to them 24 camp sites. It's quite unique. With the younger generation with the Cork Traveller Women's Network we have a great support team. The Triskel Arts Centre opened their doors to us and offered us a place to stay when we couldn't rent a room for our offices. We work with the Crawford Gallery and also The Glucksman and the we also have the cultural room at Cork Public Museum. We made a wagon for St. Patrick's Day parade and afterwards they had no where to put it and the Cork Public Museum homed it and they really, really welcomed Travellers in. So, we 've a great support system.

But the insight we didn't have at the time was that we were making a lot of art but we weren't calling it art. Every single Traveller is an artist. No matter what art – if it's hands on or if its storytelling. No matter what that might be for the person they are the creative artist. There's a big team of volunteers in CTWN, powerful women - and when you put a group of Travellers together to make an art piece – no matter what has driven them to that art piece - there is power in that room.

Traveller culture is evolving but let's bring it to where it is now. We were excited in Cork when we met the famous Leanne McDonagh she came on board and she actually gave us an insight into art and what it actually means. She mentored us and gave us an insight. For example you'd walk into the cultural room and there wasn't an inch on the wall that wasn't covered with a piece of art. But what we learned from Leanne – she actually brought a team of us into the Crawford Gallery - and asked us to look at art and what it meant to us. And to each individual it meant something different. So, we learned quite quickly about the power in art to non-Travellers as well. What we do now in the museum we change the fluency of it as we have so many art pieces. So, for example it could be about horses and wagon one month and it could be about the tent another month.

Panel's response to issues coming up during the breakout groups and through the presentations.

Funding

Nora Corcoran

Everyone was discussing funding. We plan for Miselor early in the year. But if we apply for funding we don't know if we're going to get it. So, you apply and then you have to wait.

So last year there were so many applications we couldn't start planning til July so we would invite nomadic acts from all over the world. The timing is a barrier for us as those artists mightn't be available at certain times.

And there's not enough funding. Because we would love to have a core team that could plan all

> So when we did cultural projects they were always protest pieces.

year around for Misleor . We don't just do cultural work in September and there's also Culture Night and Traveller Pride. We also had Misleor Screen a couple of years ago and invited all the funders down and all the artists – so we work on one off events.

Funding is a very, very big issue and there should be dedicated funding for Traveller arts.

And I'm part of the working group with the Heritage Council and were part of the working group for the National Traveller Heritage Strategy and definitely that would be a key target there would be that there would be dedicated funding.

As you said there are so many Traveller artists but without the funding how can we create the space. It should be year round space and if there was dedicated funding that would be an opportunity and we would see more Traveller artists coming on stream.

Mags O'Sullivan: I totally second that. I feel in our organisation we are totally stretching the budget. So we have Traveller Pride every year. I am a community development worker and we do all that cultural work in our community development working hours. I would love, love, love to see more specific cultural art workers to support our Travellers. Traveller specific too . That would take a lot of pressure off us especially as we don't have designated hours to do the cultural work.

Trish Reilly: Can I just add as well that – some of the organisations have been very good to me – Misleor. I really enjoy that and The Triskel Arts Center, The National Traveller Counselling Service – all of those. But can I just say that an artist has to have a bit of autonomy as well.

My difficulty is I don't know how to apply for funding. I know it's there. There's loads of it there and that's a fact. But I'm useless with a form. If there was somebody that could help you and assist you without having to say I own you now. Nobody owns any artist. We've been struggling for years on our own.



Martin Beanz Warde is a credit to no one but himself. Steo Wall is a credit to himself. I'm a credit to myself. Nobody owns you in the organisations. I have to say this in the right way and I've done a lot with organistions and they've been supportive and I really appreciate that.

Martin Beanz Warde: There are two very different strands of funding – the organisation and the individual. What is clear is that Travellers lack the social capital when it comes to funding.

There are people hired to take care of funding applications in the television production industry. There are people specifically hired to do that because it does take away from the creative side. They are two totally opposing parts of the brain and I get a mental block.

But I would say there are people in The Arts Council to help you go through applications. But it may not be reverberating back to people who are thinking about applying for the first time that these people exist. So maybe it's more to do with signposting that these people are available to help. They are not specifically there for Travellers. They are there for the artist from any background.

People see me performing plays. They don't understand that for the first six -previous applications I was refused funding on technical issues and things like that. But this all comes with the learning process. Unfortunately, if someone applies for funding and gets rejected once and gets rejected a second time – they may not feel any way enticed to go back a third time.

I still make the mistakes because it's so competitive.

I'll finish on this. It's important also that we don't become a token. It's important that we don't get segmented some money and then there's no meritocracy involved and that means then the overall value of our work will decrease.

I do think in the longer term you're going to have a team of Travellers working within the arts – ideally people best suited to working in the arts and this goes back to the social capital point.
We don't have many artists that can transfer into an arts role and that requires upskilling and that requires The Arts Council being proactive rather than reactive.

It means arts organisations not waiting for the knock on the door from Travellers but come to our door and say listen we've got a staff training. It's a day all to do with application forms if you're going to work with Traveller individuals looking to seek funding we suggest you get one of your workers to come along . And let them upbuild and upskill.

And hopefully we'll start seeing Travellers hired within The Arts Council and most importantly we might start seeing Travellers on the judging panels. Because that is an area in which if you don't have any knowledge of where a Traveller artists or writers are coming from you might miss a lot of the important stuff and a lot of the struggles.

A non-Traveller can't judge from the perspective of a Traveller writer. They can't understand the importance of things that might be overlooked – about the importance of women in the community. This is why we need more Travellers in spaces like that. But to begin with what's happening here today is integral.

I do think that's beginning to build. Certainly that we have the partnership with The Arts Council. We've recently had a really important appointment of Dr Rosaleen McDonagh coming onto The Arts Council Board. We are starting to see the changes. It's across multiple communities now which I'm happy to say.

> I would love, love, love to see more specific cultural workers to support our Travellers.

We are here today talking about Traveller participation in the arts. There is also a massive underrepresentation of people over a certain age, a massive under representation of people from the islands , the Gaelgeoirs , the farming community, people who would be people coming from a good background. The arts doesn't care about how much is in your pocket . The arts should only think about one thing and that's many voices feeding into the pot. And that's across the board. Today is about us but it's about everyone.

Closing Remarks



Maureen Kennelly,
Director, the Arts Council

Thank you for the opportunity to close out proceedings here before we have some wonderful music. I'm really honoured to be making these final remarks.

I want to acknowledge all the guests, presenters, panellists and artists that spoke and performed here today. We started with brilliant poems by Helen Hutchinson we had film screenings by Dead On Productions and we're going to have Niamh Dunne in a few minutes. Then some people are going on to preview a wonderful exhibition at the Hugh Lane Gallery including artists Chloe McDonagh, Dave McDonagh, Frank McCarthy, Leanne McDonagh, Paddy Collins and William Cauley. Bafushia has been organised as part of the Hugh Lane's Gallery's art education programme in collaboration with artist Seamus Nolan and Pavee Point.

I want to say a huge thanks to the speakers Delaine le Bas and Rosaleen McDonagh. That was a brilliant conversation to start this morning. We are thrilled that Rosaleen has recently been appointed to the Arts Council Board. It's vital and invaluable to have somebody with the set of lived experiences that you have in the room. It's overwhelming at times and incredibly inspiring. As Leon, our Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion said, change is happening. It's not happening as quickly as we'd like but Rosaleen's appointment is part of that change and there is lots more to come.

I want to say thanks also to for the great panel, to my colleague Leon for chairing it so well and to everyone for attending and contributing. It's brilliant that there's such a huge crowd and that everyone has stayed for the day. It's a great sign of the enthusiasm for the discussions we're having.

It is a huge source of pride for us that we are collaborating with Pavee Point on the event today and on a wider programme of work. Our work together is about is increasing inclusion and visibility, which came up a lot today, increasing participation in the arts and promoting and supporting the cultural contribution of Travellers in Irish society. Martin Beanz Warde talked about social capital and that is such a huge gap. There are things that we are doing at the Arts Council that people don't know about and today is a great signal to us to make sure that those things are clear and communicated better and that we make more provision for them.

And really that is what we want to do as a national development agency for the arts - we want to create conditions that better support Travellers to engage in the arts as professional artists, as arts workers as makers, as participants as audience members and volunteers at arts events and festivals.

It's great to hear about the support networks that the last panel spoke about, but also we need to consider how similar networks and spaces can be developed throughout the country.

We are committed to the goals outlined in the National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy and the Culture, Identity and Heritage theme, which aims to ensure that Travellers and Roma are supported to preserve and promote their cultural heritage and within that the Arts Council has committed to increasing the percentage of Traveller artists that apply to the Arts Council from 0.3% to 0.6 %.

People spoke about the difficulty and intimidating nature of some our processes and that when you feel you are outside the club it can seem very, very hard indeed - how do I surmount those barriers? You've heard from Leon and from Vanessa, our Access Officer, and other colleagues and they are absolutely committed to making sure that we support people, that we widen and fling those gates open.

Today has been a really rich, collaborative discussion but what's next? It is vital that we are in rooms together and sharing stories – Michael Collins talked about universality of stories and I often think about the American Joan Didien who said 'We tell ourselves story in order to live." The arts are essentially about stories, about bringing ourselves to audiences and to each other.

Going back to Rosaleen McDonagh, she is a huge fan of the American writer James Baldwin and in her book Unsettled Rosaleen said she called on James Baldwin to 'help inspire me and to show me what to do next'. We in the Arts Council have a very clear signal from you today on what we should be doing next and we're really looking forward to working with you on that. We're absolutely committed to doing so – so thanks once more for a wonderful, open and stimulating day, which we hope will be the first of many similar events.

The conference was brought to a close by violin player and singer Niamh Dunne along with singer songwriter Trish Reilly. Niamh is daughter of master piper Mickey Dunne and Trish is a descendent of John 'Jacko' Reilly, the renowned traditional singer.







Key Takeaways

This conference used a community development approach to bring Travellers together, to discuss their concerns, assess options and arrive at their own conclusions to make a collective decision in the interests of the community as a whole.

The event had a high level of participation, discussion and analysis on the day. There was a positive sense of energy and engagement and through this it was possible to identify a number of key themes as follows:

Key Themes

1. Spaces: People highlighted the importance of enabling collaborations through access to mainstream arts and culture institutions and venues, as well as the need for dedicated Traveller arts and cultural spaces and programmes.

2. Traveller Voice: The centring of Traveller voices in arts and culture work – both in terms of individual artists and Traveller organisations was an important topic.

3. Networks: It was seen there was a need to establish a network of Traveller artists and Traveller art workers to share information, to act as role models/mentors, to help navigate the sector, with support from those in the arts.

4. Investment and recurring funding: There was a strong need identified to support Traveller access to arts and culture mainstream funding on an ongoing basis, as well as tailored, dedicated funding for Traveller artists and organisations.

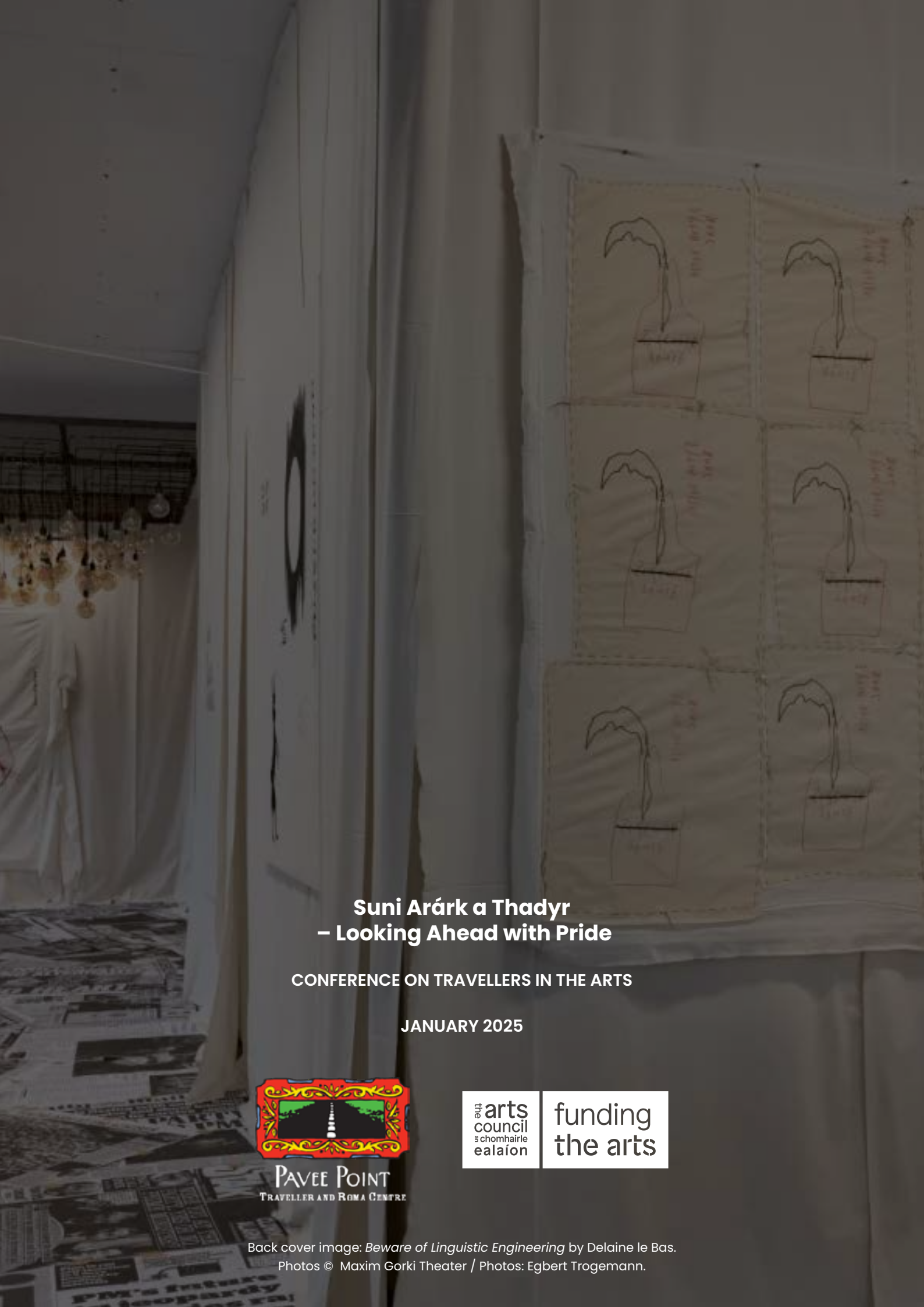
5. Sustainability: People felt there was a clear need to adopt a longer-term approach to Traveller arts and culture with long-term, sustainable Traveller arts and culture projects and funding.

6. Human Rights/Intersectionality: It was felt there was an important opportunity to use art to highlight the current human rights/social justice issues/challenges facing Travellers. This means also ensuring Traveller arts programmes consider the different needs/diversity within the Traveller community (women, LGBT, disabilities, youth, older people).

It is clear, from this conference and other discussions, that there is a lot of work to be done to increase Traveller participation in the arts. It is clear there is a huge appetite among Travellers for this work to take place. There is also a significant amount of good will within arts and culture institutions to engage also. We look forward to seeing progress and to having further discussions in this area.

Based on the finding of this conference we have identified a number of tasks and next steps in this area:

- Undertake a study – advantages and issues – relating to dedicated arts space or spaces for Travellers and what that might look like or do at this point in time.
- Work with mainstream arts and culture institutions to include Travellers in all aspects of their work and to raise awareness of the importance of listening to the voice of the artist, Traveller organisations and community.
- Lobby and advocate for better access to mainstream artists' bursaries and awards for Traveller artists, to include more Travellers on adjudication panels.
- Work with a variety of funding bodies to ensure dedicated and sustainable funding for artists and for arts and culture work within Traveller organisations.
- Develop networking supports and spaces for Travellers in the arts to collaborate, discuss relevant issues, build skills and learn from each other.
- Promote Traveller art, artists, arts events and art workers to give visibility to Travellers in these sectors and to help develop further opportunities.



Suni Arárk a Thadyr – Looking Ahead with Pride

CONFERENCE ON TRAVELLERS IN THE ARTS

JANUARY 2025

Pavee Point
Traveller and Roma Centre

the arts council an chomhairle ealaíon

funding the arts

Back cover image: *Beware of Linguistic Engineering* by Delaine le Bas.
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