

SOAPBOX: We are Not Second-Class Citizens!
by Anne Clarke, Producer Landmark Productions

‘So, Mary, what do you want to be when you grow up?’

‘Well ... what I’d really like to be, more than anything else ... is an *interpretive* artist.’

Children want to be many things when they grow up. They want to be footballers, train drivers, nurses, doctors, even - in my day - air hostesses.

If they have an interest in the arts, they want to be writers, artists, painters, poets, photographers, musicians, actors.

One thing they don’t want, and will never want, to be, is an ‘interpretive artist’. They wouldn’t know one if it reared up and bit them. It’s not something they’d find on RecruitIreland.com. So what is it, this mythical beast, and where did it come from?

It is an entity that is defined by a negative, by its opposition to something else. That - by implication primary - something is a *creative* artist.

Who is a creative artist? A painter, a sculptor, a playwright, a poet, a choreographer. An architect, a photographer. But not an actor, a dancer, a director or a designer.

Aosdána is an affiliation of creative artists, established by the Arts Council twenty-five years ago, which - and I quote - ‘honours artists whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the arts in Ireland. Through financial support and peer recognition, Aosdána encourages and assists members to donate their energies fully to their art’.

Aosdána excludes so-called ‘interpretive artists’.

So ... all artists are equal, but some are more equal than others.

It is simply absurd that

- an architect can design a theatre
- a writer can write a play to be produced there
- a composer can write music for it
- a choreographer can devise movement for it
- a photographer can take photographs of it

- and all these people are eligible for membership of Aosdána
- but the artists most directly involved are not.

This artificial distinction, as well as creating needless tensions and divisions between artists, betrays a profound ignorance of the nature of theatre and how it is created.

A year ago, at this very conference, Alan Stanford pointed out that you can make theatre without playwrights, without directors, without designers. But you cannot make a piece of theatre without actors. If ever there were a case for arguing the primary importance of the actor in the making of theatre, this is surely it. But my whole contention is that it is invidious to compare artforms, and to introduce divisions where none should exist.

Earlier this year, the Chairwoman of the Arts Council, Olive Braiden, on introducing new members of Aosdána, said : 'Being elected to Aosdána is to be honoured by your own peers, the leading artists in this country. For an artist, there can be no greater recognition than that.' I couldn't have put it better myself.

And its converse is also true : for an artist not only *not* to be acknowledged, but to be actually disqualified from membership of such an august body, simply by virtue of his or her artform - how discouraging and dispiriting is that?

But why is this so important? Why should we care?

We should care because the artists who make the art that we support are being unfairly treated. They are being marginalised, excluded, isolated from their peers.

There are very practical benefits that can accrue to members of Aosdána. Last year, the Arts Council published its survey of the Socio-Economic Conditions of Theatre Practitioners in Ireland. It revealed the shocking truth that, in 2004, average income from all theatre work for a performing artist was €7,000 for the year. In such circumstances, the *cnuas* of €12,180 would be a welcome support. It should be pointed out that payment of a *cnuas* is restricted to those artists whose other earnings, averaged over a three-year period, do not exceed one-and-a-half times the value of the *cnuas*. There are other benefits, too : the Arts Council also subscribes to a contributory pension scheme and voluntary health scheme for members of Aosdána.

But, in a funny sort of way, the most powerful reason for performing artists to be included is a less tangible one. It goes to the heart of the artist's standing in the community. It has to do with that old-fashioned word, respect.

Artists everywhere need to know their work is valued. Aosdána is a shining example of how to do that. If anything, performing artists need that sort of validation more, not less, since their work is ephemeral. There is no artefact, no lasting testament to their art. Siobhan McKenna's towering performance in *Saint Joan* will live in the memories of those who saw it. But time will pass, and the experience will dim, and in the end it will leave barely a stain upon the silence. How much more important it is, then, and what a duty we all have to ensure, that these artists be honoured in their lifetime.

There have been certain rumblings, and a proposal from left-field to introduce a separate, parallel organisation to Aosdána for these problematic interpretive artists. Well-meaning though this might be, it is a red herring.

It is a form of artistic apartheid, which would perpetuate an artificial and meaningless distinction, as well as enshrining the pre-eminence of one set of artists over another. We don't want to be associate members. We don't want our own golf course - we want to play in Portmarnock, thank you very much.

Most of us in this room are managers, producers, administrators. If we value our artists, if we believe our actors, directors, designers and dancers should no longer be treated as second-class citizens, we need to act.

I cannot believe ...

- that Roger Doyle would think that his work with Operating Theatre is more creative than that of Olwen Fouere
- that Donal O'Kelly would think it right that he should be eligible for membership as the writer of *Catalpa*, but not as its performer, when they were indivisible
- that Brian Friel would not acknowledge the monumental artistic contribution of an actor like Donal McCann
- that Tom MacIntyre believes it is right that he should be on the inside, and Tom Hickey on the outside, looking in
- that Eamon Kelly was not considered worthy to be a Saoi
- or that anyone would think that Garry Hynes should not be honoured as one of the greatest artists in the country

Tomorrow, at the plenary session, a motion will be put to the conference that Theatre Forum calls on the members of Aosdána to abolish the unjust and discriminatory practice whereby so-called 'interpretive' artists are excluded from membership; and to put procedures in place to ensure that all the artists of this nation are celebrated equally.

If this motion is passed, Theatre Forum will write to each member of Aosdána, and ask him or her directly to support an end to this unfair and untenable distinction. Then it is up to you. Ireland is a small country, and the artistic community smaller still. On this sheet of paper is a list of the 217 current members of Aosdána. We know these people. We need to look each one of them in the eye, to let them know we are knocking on the door, and ask if they will let us in.

ENDS

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