

EMBARGO TO TIME OF DELIVERY CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Speech by President Michael D. Higgins  
at the International Federation of Actors' Live Performance Conference  
Liberty Hall, Dublin

Thursday, 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2015

Mar thús is mian liom gach rath a ghuí ar an dara Chomhdháil Dhomhanda ar Léiriú Beo. Guím gach rath ar bhur n-iarrachtaí. Is imeacht tábhachtach é bhur gcomhdháil a thugann deis dúinn dul i ngleic leis na dúshláin atá aisteoirí agus lucht an léirithe beo a tabhairt aghaidh orthu san Aonú Aois is Fiche (21ú).

May I begin by wishing the second World Conference on Live Performance, every success. I wish you the very best in your efforts. Your conference is such an important event which will discuss all of the challenges facing actors and the live performance sector in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The working sessions cover all the main issues that affect the lives of performers and your impressive list of panellists drawn from over 20 countries – the island of Ireland, Canada, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Egypt, Turkey, The United Kingdom, Norway, Morocco, Russia, USA, Germany, Australia, Spain, Chile, The Netherlands, Brazil, Denmark, Zambia, Greece, and of course you have participation from UNESCO and the European Parliament. You are indeed approaching culture from a global perspective.

May I say at the outset that it is a special pleasure for Sabina and I to be here today. Sabina has been a member of Equity and then of the SIPTU Branch of Equity for many years and as a family we have a strong connection to, and affection for, the theatre.

In a number of recent speeches given in my role as President I have attempted to address the theme of labour and of culture and inevitably their shared issues. In February of this year giving the Edward Phelan Lecture to the International Labour Organisation and the National University of Ireland, I focused on the concept of ‘the precariat’, a term now in regular usage to describe the contemporary situation whereby large swathes of the active population of European countries who find themselves trapped in chronic job insecurity. Guy Standing, of the University of London defines this group, in his book “The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class”, as:

“a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development...”

Then in May, I addressed the members of Aosdána, an association of Ireland's leading artists which serves as a mechanism to provide financial support to Members of our creative community. On that occasion it struck me that Standing's description

of 'precariat' was of course one that many artists would recognise as a description of the regular and unchanged condition of the performing artist.

In addressing this issue of the position of the precarious worker, I have contrasted the vulnerability of the insecure worker with the concept of 'decent work', a socially-grounded and holistic understanding of work as a source of personal dignity and freedom, capable of providing security for the family, and which serves as the basis for prosperity in the community and for democratic flourishing and participation.

For performing artists, the problems they face are made ever more acute by the absence of clearly articulated cultural policies within which the importance, independence and democratic value of the artist might be properly recognised and respected.

Artists, like all others in our society, are entitled to decent conditions of work and to know that their role and their contribution to society is understood and respected. If we are to have any meaningful discussion on the place of the arts in our society we must, as a fundamental starting point, release ourselves from any romantic notion that artists thrive on poverty and that penury and indigence act as a liberating force on creativity.

We must also recognise artists as workers engaged in valuable and productive occupations; workers who have a right to engage in collective bargaining, and who also have a right to basic pension security and social protection which is sensitive to, and takes account of, the irregular nature of their work.

In providing the necessary protection and supports to actors as workers requires a comprehensive approach that covers the full life-cycle of the artist. Acting is a profession with specific if varying forms of professional formation. It does not include any of the well defined career paths leading to promotions, pay rises and increasingly secure lifestyles sought or enjoyed by many other professions. Yet its democratic importance, as the history of democracy indicates, is immense, as is its function in releasing creativity for our shared lives. It is so important that we support artists at times of ill health and in later life, just as we seek to nurture those embarking on their creative careers.

Your research shows that the position of the actor and performer has become even more precarious and vulnerable during this recent period of economic crisis and austerity and that this is a global reality, with increasing use of unpaid workers and deepening insecurity for workers.

Looking at the substantive programme of these issues which you will address over the course of this conference, I recognise the urgency which you attach to these issues of labour and social protection, issues that should be central to all considerations about how to best support artistic endeavour.

We must be unequivocal in recognising that the cultural space is wider than the economic space created by a traded economy, and it is crucial that we foster a public understanding of this central importance of public cultural space. We must also admit that, at present, such an understanding does not exist at the level of

European policy. If it did, we would see recognition that at times of economic contraction you need more, not less, provision for public forms of cultural access if one is not to add a cultural deficit in terms of citizenship to the experience of unemployment.

Those who fund and manage theatre also have responsibilities to create a just and inclusive environment which allows its members to flourish and realise their possibilities. This set of obligations on employers can be summarised as the duty to provide an ethical workplace for workers. Under the President of Ireland's Ethics Initiative, a national consultative process which I have been hosting for the past year and a half, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions ran a programme of activities under the banner "Ethical Workplace". Working with their member unions, Congress set about gathering views from individual workers, workers' unions and representative bodies' on what are the essential qualities of a workplace that could be considered ethical. Unionised musicians and actors from the Equity branch of SIPTU played an active part in that process – and of course provided entertainment, the product of their labour and of their gift, at the launch event hosted in this very building, Liberty Hall.

The outcomes from that process demonstrated that workers' concerns with the justice and fairness of their own treatment, sit side by side with a deep commitment to social justice and to a fair society. This should not be surprising to this audience as the cultural sector generally, and theatre in particular, has historically been in the vanguard in promoting tolerance and combating prejudice and discrimination in society.

In the areas of gender, race, disability, and sexuality, theatre has used its formidable emotional and political force to break down stigma and to destroy inherited forms of domination and oppression. Looking at the research material FIA has brought forward for this conference I am confident that this leadership role will continue, but also that it can be extended with regard to the sector's capacity as employers, as well as its role in public advocacy on social issues.

Equality and full respect for diversity within the theatre remains an aspiration, but with the leadership of representative bodies such as FIA it is an aspiration that can, I believe, be realised.

The relationship between the actor, as artist and as worker, and her society is profound and multifaceted. No discussion on the place and purpose of the arts can be complete without an examination of the profound relationship that exists between all art forms and the society to which they respond or which they envisage. The work of artists has an exploratory significance that is as important as their interpretative role. The enabling and supporting of our artists and the protection of their space of practice are essential in the creation and sustenance of a truly functioning society. The health of its cultural space and practitioners is reflective of the quality of their host society.

It must be acknowledged that Irish artists and Irish cultural institutions have, along with many sectors of Irish life, suffered significantly during a period that struggled with the consequences of a global, European and national kind of speculative

economics and the austerity that served as a response. The fact that cuts of around 40 per cent to the annual budgets of the majority of our cultural institutions, along with a reduction in funding for arts, culture and film by some €16 million between 2011 and 2014, underlines the vulnerable place the arts are too often granted in our society and in the public consciousness and media discourse.

So many of our citizens in Europe have been forced to choose between not just Bread and Roses, but between survival and social life itself. Any view of the arts as something apart, something that occurs on the fringes of society, an optional extra for which funding is an extremely low priority in times of economic recession must always be challenged.

It is regrettable that this reduction in funding has occurred despite the overwhelming evidence from independent sources of the economic benefits that flow from our creative sector. Funding for the arts is sometimes still perceived as being of the nature of grant support, rather than as the investment in the infrastructure of social life, joy and cohesion that it really is.

The case for valuing our public expenditure and investment in the arts is unanswerable – the value lies in the return that we receive from this investment at all levels. The profound and valuable contribution that our artists make to society cannot be overstated. It is so often through our encounters with literature, drama and art that we come to understand the human condition, finding our perceptions challenged, clarified or enhanced.

It is through the work of playwrights such as Sean O’Casey, Samuel Beckett, John B. Keane, Hugh Leonard, Brian Friel, Marina Carr, Tom Murphy and many others, and the interpretations of the gifted actors, including the many friends I see here today, who bring their words to life on the stage and screen, that generations of audiences have followed the changing preoccupations of our own nation, seeing, reflected back at them the society, with its beauty and its ugliness, its dreams and its created nightmares that have formed the present and will shape the future Ireland that we might craft together.

Even by the criteria of the market, what sector has done more to enhance our national reputation or in what other sphere can Ireland claim to have such a rich tradition as an undisputed world leader? Jobs in the artistic sector are more enduring than in comparable sectors. Where countries have invested in theatre, film and television the economic dividends have been demonstrable and significant.

However, if we are to recognise the true value of our artistic and cultural sector, we must regard cultural policy as contributing to an essential part of our national infrastructure, a space in the national practice and imagination, that allows us to better understand ourselves.

If a cultural space is to be a truly enduring one, it must be a space within which various forms of creative activity are made possible. The vital role that arts and culture play in creating dynamic, creative and reflective societies must be acknowledged, and again, in that context, it could be argued that the provision and enrichment of creative spaces becomes even more important in times of crisis and

recovery when there is a pressing need for a national process of re-evaluation and reflection.

I believe that it is essential to have a national cultural policy, one that recognises the fundamental role of cultural access in citizenship while respecting the integrity and independence of the personal artistic inspiration; and that any meaningful discussion about public funding for the arts must be based on that principle. We will have to recognise that true access means more than the possibility of entering public places of culture; it requires having access to the creativity of the self in interaction with others, to have the capacity to share, to enlighten and emancipate and to be enlightened and emancipated.

The 1997 report of the culture committee of the Council of Europe 'In From the Margins' stated that 'Culture will have to be brought into the heart of public administration'. In the specific case of theatre, this conference also recognises the need to engage with, and constantly respond to, an ever evolving society. It is appropriate then that you are discussing the prospects and suitable place and role for the possibilities of technology.

The task of recapturing a public cultural space will be essential if we are to meet the great challenges facing our international politics at this time, challenges which require not merely a response from the few or the perceived hegemony in the political and economic sphere, but also all of the citizens in the cultural sphere. The current global challenges such as how to marry ecology and development; of how to resolve the current injustices of trade and debt, of gender equality – these are all questions on which the artistic community in the past has given, and in the future I know will continue to give, leadership.

Conflict, intolerance and extremism are on the rise in many regions of the world, often based on abusive interpretations of sacred texts. A shared understanding of the diversity and processional nature of culture provides the ground on which interactions between traditions can take place in peace and mutual regard. Culture can be a space of healing and a space of celebration, but it can only perform such a function if it is treated as central to democracy and citizenship and not as a mere commodity of economic surplus, not as a palliative but rather as a component of life that is energising and emancipatory of the self and society.

The position of democracy itself is also under pressure at this time. Parliaments have ceded power and function to unaccountable economic centres of dominance. Faced with a growing sense of powerlessness in the face of alienating forms of technocratic dominance and unaccountable and disempowering economic models, publics have become disengaged from participation in civic life and disillusioned with political institutions.

At the European level, in particular, while much has been written of a "democratic deficit" and the emergence from economic crisis, leaders often speak about undertaking a "re-engagement" with the people of Europe. However, in this discourse, the role of what we share as a mosaic of our different cultural understandings, is rarely identified or recognised as a source of new paths to co-operation. Surely one area where this might be productively advanced is in the area

of culture – an area of civic life which enjoys the trust of the citizens of Europe, an area of economic and social activity which stands blameless and removed from the institutional failings which have so damaged the European Social Model over the past decade. If we are to, in the words of Jurgen Habermas, “rescue the public sphere”, we must remember that the public cultural space is a limitless resource.

In doing so, I argue that we might usefully revisit the vision of Europe upon which the Council of Europe was constructed in the post-war era, and which later informed the founding of the EU. The Europe conceived by Robert Schumann and others was one in which the differences of ethnicity and language would give way to a shared sense of joy and an informed respect for a common cultural heritage. The bond between the peoples of Europe and their culture, and the value placed on that culture and on the different civilisations which had crossed borders over the centuries, was envisaged as the mortar that would link the former adversary nation states.

While the Council of Europe has undertaken important work in this area, the EU has not developed a viable and enabling cultural policy. Some progress has been made in the area of education, but regrettably there is still a reluctance at the policy level in Brussels to allow cultural policy and artistic institutions a full voice around the table. This principle of international cooperation founded on a respect for culture is one that can be applied at the global level too. UNESCO is one of the UN institutions that has been neglected and underdeveloped, but I am a strong supporter of its potential to contribute to resolving many of the great global challenges of which I have spoke. If afforded its proper central role, culture can provide the grist and the inspiration to build understanding in our divided world.

Finally, I would like to return again to the position of the individual artist, the actor and performer. It is one of our finest Gaelic traditions, that in our ancient social order a special esteem and status was afforded to the file - a term which encompasses the role of poet, bard, seer, storyteller, scholar and troubadour. As you host your world conference here in Dublin, I would like to tell you that Ireland is always at its best when it holds our actors and performers and those who visit us from overseas in high esteem and I, as President of Ireland, on behalf of the Irish people am honoured to welcome you among us.

Guím gach rath ar bhur gcomhdháil tábhachtach.

[I wish you well for this important conference.]

Thank you very much