



Celebrating Blue Teapot Theatre Company

by Sonja Brodie



Celebrating Blue Teapot Theatre Company

by Sonja Brodie

Peter Triest Publications

Kilcornan House

Clarinbridge

Co Galway, Ireland

H91 K2E9

e-mail: petertriest.publ@bocsi.ie

ISBN 978-1-8382723-4-0

Text Copyright © Brothers of Charity, 2021

Photographs Copyright © Blue Teapot Theatre Company, 2021

Photographs used by kind permission of Blue Teapot Theatre Company

Blue Teapot is a multi-award winning Theatre Company, Performing Arts School and Outreach programme for people with intellectual disabilities which is at the forefront of Arts and Disability in Ireland. We are committed to high quality theatre, training and the celebration of creativity.

Blue Teapot has gone from strength to strength since its foundation by the Brothers of Charity Services in 1996, moving to the establishment of an independent company in 2009. It has gained wide recognition and respect from artistic and civic organisations and is seen as a model flagship for Arts and Disability.

Fiona Coffey (Gardner & Isard, 2015)

Series Editor: Patrick McGinley

Celebrating Blue Teapot Theatre Company

Contents

2	The Author: <i>Sonja Brodie</i>
3	Foreword: <i>Marilyn Gaughan Reddan</i>
4	Introduction
7	Petal Pilley at the Helm
8	Curtain up on New Talent: Blue Teapot Performing Arts School
14	‘Bright Soul’ and ‘Sparkle’
17	The Play that Helped to Change the Law - Sanctuary
18	‘Is it because I have Downs?’
18	Centre-Stage, Mainstage - The Galway International Arts Festival
20	Euro Vision - <i>Crossing the Line</i>
23	All the World’s a Stage
26	Crossing the Line Festival
28	References and Acknowledgements

The Front Cover:

Some Blue Teapot Theatre Actors: Front Row: Jennifer Cox, Emer Macken, Patrick Becker, Valerie Egan and Michael Hayes; Back row: Charlene Kelly and Kieran Coppinger



The Author: Sonja Brodie



Sonja is a London native who has lived in Ireland since 1989. A teenage Sonja followed the rock band The Waterboys to Galway and changed the course of her life. Galway became home, and a love affair with the arts began in 1990 on a FAS scheme with Macnas where, fatefully, Sonja joined Petal Pilley and Hillary Kavanagh, Blue Teapot's Artistic Director and Producer. In another Blue Teapot plot twist, Sonja later became Administrator of Galway Youth Theatre from 1999 to 2005, working alongside Niamh Dillon before she departed to become Blue Teapot's first Artistic Director.

Not wanting to 'tread the boards', Sonja prefers the backstage environment to the spotlight. In 1992, she found herself at the world renowned Edinburgh Festival with Punchbag Theatre Company as Stage Manager of *Eclipsed*, a groundbreaking play set in a Magdalene laundry that went on to win a prestigious Fringe First Award. Since then, Sonja has worked in various theatre production roles from the box office in the Town Hall Theatre, Galway to stage management, film extras coordinator, Arts Editor of GalwayNow magazine and co-founder of Flying Pig Comedy Troupe along with Tommy Tiernan.

In a career gear change, Sonja left Galway for Tipperary in 2005 to pursue working in the horseracing industry and was fortunate to work for Coolmore Stud in Fethard, the global leader in Thoroughbred racing and bloodstock for 5 years in stud administration.

Sonja commenced work with Blue Teapot in January 2011, firstly as Administrator, then Performing Arts School Co-coordinator (2012 – 2015) and General Manager since 2016. Primary responsibilities include financial administration, grant applications, content generation for media and digital platforms, and administration compliance with The Charities Governance Code. Sonja also enjoys the occasional teaching stint, giving classes in Theatre Production, Anatomy of Comedy and film studies.

In 2020, Sonja became a proud Irish citizen.

Foreword

Blue Teapot Theatre Company is really quite a remarkable organisation: one which sees the full life cycle of the artist supported from development to training, to qualification and to performance. There is a real joy in watching this ensemble perform, their ease, their skill, their close relationships, it's a joy to watch and it's a joy to experience such interactive theatre.



Over the last number of years we have seen the company grow internationally and develop a complex European programme, and we all look forward to the outcome of this programme. I have also watched Blue Teapot Theatre Company transition to film, which they have managed with great ease and international acclaim.

I am really honoured to have been on the Blue Teapot journey from the beginning. I have seen careers developed and nurtured, I have seen lives greatly enhanced and I have seen audiences left enthralled. Mostly, I have seen the love, care, support and attention that every member of this company experiences. It is unique.

Our sincere thanks to the team, the board and the Teapots for their endless contribution to theatre and to the arts in Ireland and beyond.

Marilyn Gaughan Reddan

Head of Programme, Galway European Capital of Culture



Introduction

'Being in Blue Teapot has shown me who I really am and what I am meant to be in this world – an actress like Jennifer Aniston or Meryl Streep – and show people what I can really do.' So declares Jennifer Cox, company member of Blue Teapot Theatre Company and an avid public spokesperson for her work. This statement is one of many that could sum up the impact Blue Teapot has had since its foundation, not just for individuals or the disability arts sector, but for society at large.

The year 2021 marks 25 years since the working relationship between Brothers of Charity Services Galway and Blue Teapot began. In 1996, staff members Fiona Coffey, Catherine Seale and Claude Madec established the project to provide a simple creative outlet of self-expression for people supported by the Services. As founder Fiona Coffey recalls,

We started initially with a number of drama workshops followed by a Christmas production in Druid Theatre with Catherine Seale as facilitator/director. It became clear that many of the individuals supported showed great talent as actors and that there was untapped potential ripe for discovery. The actors had a natural ability to engage with the audience, capturing hearts and minds, and boundless energy for live performance. This inspired us to set ambitious targets for bigger and better shows and sowed the seeds of establishing a theatre group for people with an intellectual disability.

As for the naming of said project? We believe the legend goes that there just happened to be a blue teapot on a table when participants were asked to think of a name. So unless proven otherwise, that'll do! And they were raring to go, with appearances on the main stage of the Town Hall Theatre Galway to capacity houses with *Ocean Blues* (1998), directed by Catherine Seale and *A Millennium Fable* (2000) directed by Hugo Seale. This clearly demonstrated, certainly from a personal outcomes point of view, that there were many eager participants wanting even more opportunities to learn drama skills, practise and perform.



Judith Wolf and Jason Scott



Ana Bella Alvarez, Sonja Brodie, Hillary Kavanagh & Petal Pilley



Rueben Parry, Cheryl Hudson & Michael Patrick Breen



Richard Mannion, Valerie Egan, Patrick Becker, Kieran Coppinger and Frank Butcher in 'Lock Up Those Auld Comedians' (2007)

Such was its initial success, it expanded rapidly with the appointment of a Project Coordinator, Niamh Dillon, in March 2001. Niamh developed a dedicated ensemble that would form Blue Teapot Theatre Company. Among Niamh Dillon's early pioneers emerged Patrick Becker, Frank Butcher, Richard Mannion, Valerie Egan and Kieran Coppinger, most of whom remain in our ensemble today. Niamh worked with the budding actors in exploratory drama workshops to upskill and produce lively, comedic shows such as *Blue* (2001) and *Cinders* (2006).

Undoubtedly a key highlight remains the invitation from Macnas to perform *The Ball* at the Special Olympics World Games Opening Ceremony in Dublin (2003). Directed by Rod Goodall, former Artistic Director of Macnas, our cast took to Croke Park with aplomb appearing in front of millions in this globally televised event. For all involved and those who witnessed it, it was a never to be forgotten experience. By mid-2000, we had firmly established ourselves in Galway's creative landscape, with regular appearances in St Patrick's Day parades, and producing the fun shows *Lock Up Those Auld Comedians* (2007) and *Fool Me?* (2008) with guest directors Miquel Barcelo and Jonathan Gunning. We now had a body of creative work attractive to funders as well as to our growing audiences. But it also became time for a gear change.



Petal Pilley at the Helm

In 2007, artistic direction changed hands with Petal Pilley at the helm, under which a strong theatre ensemble emerged. Nine committed actors began to further their professional careers and be publically recognised as such – actors paid for their work. Our core mission became to effect positive change in public consciousness concerning people with intellectual disabilities

through the medium of theatre, letting our members' inherent talent and creativity speak for itself. Petal recalls,

My predecessor had started to develop a small group of actors who had an aptitude for acting. However, for some onlookers, a lack of skill was confused with disability when people were performing, and I thought 'No, we can't have that.' We needed to get everybody on a level playing field. It became really clear to me that there was no real training for actors with a disability. One of the things I did was give them some professional training and begin to make professional theatre.

A move into a City centre premises in 2008 further facilitated our integration within Galway's cultural landscape by being based in a disused fruit & veg shop on Munster Avenue.

If you're on the outskirts of town and if you're a marginalised group anyway, it just reinforces that. We found a little building, rough around the edges but it gave a strong sense of belonging. We're situated in what's known as Galway's West End, five minutes away from Druid Theatre, Galway City Museum and Galway Arts Centre.

In 2009 we became a registered charity, now a multi-stranded theatre company, committed to delivering high quality theatre, training and the celebration of creativity. An immediate impact of that was our involvement in the spectacular opening ceremony welcoming the 2009 Volvo Ocean Race to Galway.



Working with some of Galway's finest theatre practitioners was the creative drive and, for our actors, opportunities to really hone their craft. There's nothing quite like the deep end of taking on William Shakespeare and the comedic romp, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2010), perfectly chosen by Petal for her directorial debut. The production was a triumph not just for our actors overcoming the demands of the Bard's complex prose, which so many actors find quite a struggle, but as a launching pad for stratospheric things to come. The production featured a cast of eleven, of whom eight were supported by the Services, in a full staging of the play to capacity houses in our new home - Blue Teapot Theatre. Prior to opening night, RTE One Television Nationwide paid a visit to capture interviews with Petal and the cast to give viewers a glimpse of our creative path. Responses to the production from audiences were overwhelming in their critical acclaim. Succinctly put by Rod Goodall, '*Blue Teapot has the ability to set the bar high and then support people gracefully over it.*'

A Midsummer Night's Dream began a ten year exponential growth spurt artistically, operationally, and publically. While our actors made groundbreaking theatre, the development of emerging talent became an important focus. The next generation of talent was waiting in the wings.

Curtain up on New Talent: Blue Teapot Performing Arts School

In 2010, we founded Blue Teapot Performing Arts School to provide vocational arts training for those who cannot access this training elsewhere. Research showed us that in Ireland those with an intellectual disability do not attend regular theatre academies. Nor do they attend auditions or apply to higher education colleges in performing arts. We realised that we wanted to address this need so we began the process of being formally recognised as an accredited provider of programmes leading to FETAC (now QQI) awards. We commissioned experts in theatre craft, music, art, costume design and dance to develop a tailored programme for specific required learning outcomes. Along with Level 2 & 3 Drama, our Foundation Performing Arts programme was officially validated in 2011 and we began a three year cycle of vocational training on the National Framework of Qualifications. Six students became the first set of 'Teacups' as the curtain went up for Blue Teapot Performing Arts School.



*Duke Theseus (Patrick Becker) and Hippolyta (Emer Macken) in
'A Midsummer Night's Dream'*

We are blessed to work with fantastic tutors, facilitators and artists, all living in the West of Ireland, with years of extensive professional experience in their particular creative fields. Tutors are a vital part of the overall success story for our students, and each one has contributed hugely, not only to the curriculum, but has inspired each and every student to have a lifelong affinity and love for creative arts. Theatre training has long been understood to develop communication skills, a sense of self, and connection to others through creative collaboration, and we were privileged to see all of these developments in our students in Blue Teapot Performing Arts School. As Drama tutor and theatre Director Rod Goodall explains, *‘To be trained in the arts - drama, dance, music and so on does not mean that the student will achieve a career in these disciplines. It means that they’ll enjoy more creativity, more confidence and be better equipped for social interactions in their lives. Blue Teapot Abú!’*

Music Tutor Fiona O’Dea sums up her job satisfaction as, *‘Working at Blue Teapot has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Sharing the power and magic of music and singing with these wonderful enthusiastic and creative people is a joy I look forward to every day.’*



Duke Thesius (Patrick Becker) breaks up a fight between Demetrius left (Paul Connolly) and Lysander (Kieran Coppinger) in ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’



Michael Hayes (Puck) - in Midsummer Night's Dream in Bridget's Garden, Oughterard

Costume Design and Puppetry tutor Charmian Goodall has taught every single ‘Teacup’ since 2010. Charmian recalls,

From the early days with the Teacups, when we had very little space or equipment, there have been many changes, but the one thing that has not changed is the learners’ enthusiasm and pride in making costumes and puppets. Most groups start off being rather shy, but they soon relax and become open, confident and interactive.

Time and again we have witnessed students becoming more independent, overcoming depression, frustration and isolation relatively quickly as they immerse themselves in the Performing Arts School programmes. We’re as proud of the blossoming of their personalities as we are of their academic achievements. Participation in live performances for audiences remains a driving force behind most students’ ambitions by joining the professional ensemble on stage in productions such as ‘*Oliver Twists!*’ (2018) or in street theatre parades on St. Patrick’s Day.

Now with 22 alumni graduated (in grand ceremonies in the G Hotel!), we have a 100% success rate for all students in every QQI module to date. One of the only consistently discussed negative outcomes from parents and connections was that following completion of the Performing Arts School there are few follow-on options. This was viewed as having significant negative effects on individuals who had found meaning and value in their work and lives, but are not supported or able to sustain this. This issue, as well as the financial challenges in doing so, became a focus external to Blue Teapot. Since the class of 2016 graduates, there has been increased arts programming in the disability services sector in County Galway and further afield which has led to the creation of new arts based projects particularly so within Brothers of Charity Services Ireland, which continues to ensure creative arts projects are aligned with overall strategic missions at regional and national levels.



Graduate Maeve Moran celebrates



Kieran Coppinger, Richard Hickey and Rod Goodall in 'Oliver Twists!' (2018)

In Galway alone, we've seen our graduates move on to other Brothers of Charity Services' projects such as Arts Alive, That's Life, and Limelight Arts. Until the Covid-19 pandemic came along, there was also the monthly outing to Bounce, a Club Night for adults with intellectual disabilities in a renowned live music venue.

“Bright Soul” and “Sparkle”

Our origins as a community project are still consciously maintained today by a strong connection to our community roots through Bright Soul and Sparkle, two Outreach programmes dedicated to participants who would otherwise have limited or no creative outlet. The longer standing of these is Bright Soul a multi-generational project originally called ‘*Drama in the Community*’. Bright Soul encourages arts participation in a fun and stimulating environment with members working with many arts practitioners, giving exposure to a variety of art forms and participation in end of year shows along with Performing Arts School students. Bright Soul has also benefitted from inputs of countless, wonderful volunteers.



Ronan Loughney ‘Bright Soul’ Volunteer Ireland Award Winner 2015 supporting actor
James Campbell



One of our volunteers who cannot go unnamed is former Connacht Rugby Ace Ronan Loughney who served an incredible 10 years, sometimes arriving battered and bruised from European Champions Cup matches to assist the tutor and participants on a winter's night. In 2015, Ronan Loughney made history by becoming the first professional sportsman to win a Volunteer Ireland Award. Ronan took home the award in the Arts, Culture and Media category for his work with Blue Teapot.

Sparkle is our Saturday drama programme for teenagers with intellectual disabilities originating as a direct response from parents affiliated to the Galway branch of Down Syndrome Ireland. In October 2014, we trialled a pilot drama programme with fourteen participants aged 13-17 years with volunteer inputs from parents. Such was its success, we continued to deliver this unfunded service to the participants. We're delighted to work with Lali Morris, former Artistic Director of Babaro International Festival for Children, as lead tutor. Lali brings more than twenty years' expertise working in the area of arts, children and young people. Sparkle has evolved to become a stepping stone to our Performing Arts School for those reaching 18 years who wish to pursue vocational training in performing arts. The future looks bright for Sparkle.

From 2014, we had four programmes – Theatre Company, Performing Arts School, Bright Soul, and Sparkle – and forty-four participants across all strands. What the latter three have in common is the quality artistic output of Blue Teapot Theatre Company, giving rise to high demand for people to access our programmes. None more so than as a result of a new play that would change the fortunes of our company, alter perspectives in audiences, and promote a national discourse on the 'Right to Love' and who it applies to.



Richard Hickey (top photo) and Pat Kenna in the St Patrick's Day parade, 2011



The Play that Helped to Change the Law - Sanctuary

In 2012, Petal Pilley responded to conversations she had had with our actors about finding love and deep seated desires to have relationships. That afternoon session was to have a profound effect on the company by leading to the commission of a new play dealing honestly with a searing issue that was having a devastating impact on their lives. We'd been introduced to Galway based playwright Christian O'Reilly in 2011 through a new writing bursary competition launched by Arts & Disability Ireland. Christian had a proven track record debuting plays with Druid Theatre Company, and although the bursary fell the way of someone else, Len Collin, Petal offered Christian an invitation to come on board as playwright and tackle the subject matter.

Christian recalls,

I was invited to watch the company performing and improvising as actors and I was blown away by how talented they were - it was amazing. We basically just all sat around and we said, 'All right guys, let's talk about sex! Let's talk about relationships.' All the company talked really openly about their frustrations and desires. I was given all this fantastic material to work with and throughout the process, I was constantly consulting with the actors. They were heavily involved in the whole process.

Thus a few short months later, *Sanctuary* enjoyed its world premiere in October 2012 at the Galway Theatre Festival to critical acclaim. Directed by Petal Pilley, this bittersweet comedy explored sex, disability and what happens in rare moments alone for a couple with an intellectual disability. The plot centres on a group trip to the cinema, as a welcome break from their training centre, going awry. For central characters Larry and Sophie, circumstances lead to a rare opportunity to be together in private in a world that does everything to keep them apart. While Larry and Sophie explore their relationship further, other characters examine their own status, and the choices and freedoms they may or may not have with regards romantic or intimate lives.

'Is it because I have Downs?'

In *Sanctuary*, the character Sandy asks Peter, whom she fancies, '*Is it because I have Downs?*' The characters talk about how they feel and think about having an intellectual disability. Rarely on stage (and subsequently on film) have their disabilities been discussed by people with intellectual disability in such an open and honest way. It is this experience that audiences found astounding and it provided a memorable and powerful experience. Stereotypes were removed and replaced with reality where feelings, abilities, challenges and aspirations were no different between characters and audiences.

Centre-Stage, Mainstage - The Galway International Arts Festival

One of our core strategic aims has been inclusion in the mainstream, performing on the main stages of Ireland and participation in Galway's biggest cultural shop window - Galway International Arts Festival (GIAF). The success of *Sanctuary* on stage was that our actors told their own story with courage and artistry which garnered widespread national and political interest in their plight. So many people were disappointed to have missed the initial run that we knew we had to fulfil untapped potential. With the aftermath of *Sanctuary*'s debut fresh in the minds, we began 2013 with intent to approach Paul Fahy, Artistic Director of GIAF with the proposal to include *Sanctuary* in the official programme. Petal Pilley recalls, '*Blue Teapot in the Galway International Arts Festival is the realisation of a huge goal for me, something I wanted for the company when I joined seven years ago.*' In July 2013, *Sanctuary* was reprised for a sell-out two week run in the main theatre programme. Speaking about this, Paul Fahy concurred, '*They are a model flagship company for arts and disability, their shows are highly anticipated and are expected to sell out, and they do. We have Blue Teapot in the festival not because they are from Galway but because they are worthwhile.*'

The impact was immediate, leading to widespread media exposure, an invitation to Dublin Fringe Festival, featuring in RTE /WILDFIRE FILMS award winning documentary *Somebody To Love* and continued interest in the subject matter across national discourse.



Charlene Kelly (Sophie) and Kieran Coppinger (Larry) in 'Sanctuary' (2012)

RTE Six-One News, Miriam O’Callaghan Radio show, Ireland AM amongst others discussed and debated about changing Section 5, Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act (1993). This law criminalized sexual activity of people who are ‘mentally impaired’ unless they were married to each other. In 2014, Sanctuary’s two leads Charlene Kelly and Kieran Coppinger were invited by then Senator Katherine Zappone to a media gathering proposing a new amendment Bill to repeal the existing law by eliminating discrimination and to ensure that people with disabilities have the same freedom to consent to sexual activity as everyone else.

Sanctuary went on to become a ground-breaking Irish Film Board/BAI/RTE funded feature film produced by Zanzibar Films and starring the original cast. Directed by Len Collin, it is one of only a small number of feature films in the world today that features actors with intellectual disability in the principal roles. The film *Sanctuary* had its world premiere as the closing film of *Galway Film Fleadh* in 2016, winning Best New Irish Film, followed a few months later by the cast winning the prestigious *Dublin Film Critics’ Choice, The Michael Dwyer Discovery Award* at the 2017 Audi Dublin International Film Festival. Just as *Sanctuary* was about to screen in Dublin, the law was repealed on 14th February 2017 (Valentine’s Day), when the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill (2015) passed through the final stage in the Seanad, lessening the terms that will mean persons with intellectual disabilities can be pre-judged in the eyes of the law, followed in May 2017 by a change of the law. With that, we’ll leave the last word on *Sanctuary* to Newstalk journalist Steve Daunt: ‘*Without doubt it is the most important stage kiss in Irish theatrical history*’.

Euro Vision - *Crossing the Line*

Coinciding with this explosive creative output, behind the scenes important connections were developing further afield. In 2012, Petal Pilley had been invited to Washington, USA as a guest at an assembly of thought leaders in disability arts at the John F Kennedy Centre. This is where seeds for a future venture - *Crossing the Line* - were sown. Professional theatre made by those with ID is part of an international



Victorian Gentlemen James O'Connell & Cathal Scott Reynolds in 'Oliver Twists!' 2018

movement that views arts practice in the disability sector as not just of therapeutic or social value but of important value to our wider society - that of high quality art comparable to other professional companies, and we merited our place at this table.

Roll on to 2014, and word on the street was that Galway City was planning a bid for European Capital of Culture. Consolidated by 2015, Bid Book organizers approached Blue Teapot along with various cultural and institutional organisations. What was our role and with whom? In 2016, Petal Pilley travelled to Roubaix, France to other roundtable meetings with some of the representatives present in Washington involved in *Crossing the Line*, a Creative Europe-funded programme of the European Union. *Les Oiseau Mouche* (France), *Moomsteatern* (Sweden) and *Mind the Gap* (England) were engaged in a two-year process, developing artistic practice and a network of professional arts practitioners for disabled artists. From there on, we were invited to be a full partner in an extended network of pan European companies which included *Theatre Babel* (Netherlands), *Hijinx* (Wales) and *Teatr 21* (Poland). What followed was to be a four year journey of exploration, exchanges, artist mobilities and, for us, extending an invitation to Hijinx to produce their globetrotting hit comedy 'Meet Fred' at Blue Teapot Theatre for Galway International Arts Festival 2017.

In July 2016, the adjudicating panel of judges for the European Capital of Culture visited Blue Teapot at the start of their assessment day. Later that month, we knew our fate – Galway was the winning bid for European Capital of Culture 2020. And while the city celebrated, we were already germinating what was to become our biggest and most ambitious project - *Crossing the Line Festival* - for Galway European Capital of Culture in May 2020. With over 100 Irish and European artists due to participate and come together in Galway over four days, it would be a first for a European Capital of Culture. The week would see many extraordinary theatre performances, dissemination events, industry networking and collaborations between artists, organisations and audiences.



All the World's a Stage

Throughout all of this, we were doing what we do best – theatre. We had had another hit production in the Galway International Arts Festival 2014. Titled ‘ID’, the show had guest director Scott Williams at the helm, working with the actors on a semi-autobiographic devised theatre show. Another sell-out run with good reviews concluded with us realising that we’d outgrown the audience capacity of our theatre. With big ambitions on the horizon and new theatre productions in the pipeline, the next theatrical outings would see a move to Galway’s Town Hall Theatre. An adaptation of a poignant play about the delicacy of friendship was especially written by Eileen Gibbons from her original two-hander to a cast of five Blue Teapot actors. *Waiting For Elvis* was directed by Petal Pilley and opened in Galway Theatre Festival with two performances on the Town Hall Theatre main stage, it was well attended and proved a commercial hit. This justifiable move demonstrated an appetite amongst mainstream audiences for our work outside of July festival appearances.

Professional Theatre is and remains our number one objective. We continue to raise the bar with every production and we named 2018 our ‘Year of Theatre’, ending with the Charles Dicken’s classic *Oliver Twists!* adapted and directed by Rod Goodall involving a cast of seventeen – actors and performing arts students together - set in Victorian London. In May we unveiled a ground-breaking production of Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway. A passion project, this production comprised an integrated cast of Galway’s finest stage and screen talent and with the pivotal role of



*Jennifer Cox (Rose Mundy)
Dancing at Lughnasa*

Rose Mundy played by Jennifer Cox, an actor with Down syndrome. Describing this decision, Petal said,

In the play, the dynamics of a family are both greatly enriched and made more vulnerable by the presence of a sibling with an intellectual disability.

Casting Jennifer Cox as Rose has deepened the audiences' experience of an Irish theatre classic, one they may be familiar with but have not experienced in this way,

This interpretation was enthusiastically backed with funding by the Arts Council of Ireland. All five performances were a critical and commercial success, giving us our biggest and broadest audiences yet for a theatre show. Coinciding with this was a major development coming to fruition. We had been working towards an ambition to stage a theatre production written by an artist from within Blue Teapot. In 2017, a pilot project 'The Blank Page' was initiated to meet this creative desire facilitated by playwright Eileen Gibbons. In 2018, this driving objective was established with Charlene Kelly being the artist displaying a definite aptitude. Throughout 2019, the development of this play continued and now titled 'Into The Dark Woods' with Charlene in the rehearsal room continuing to further develop the script.



Paul Connolly and Kieran Coppinger rehearsing for '84' at Druid Theatre Culture Night 2011



Charlene Kelly playwright 'Into the Dark Woods'



Crossing the Line Festival

Throughout 2019 and into 2020, our entire focus was the momentum towards the launch of *Crossing the Line Festival*, artist residencies and visits to Warsaw, Poland and Malmo, Sweden as part of a Creative Europe-funded small co-operation project *Trasna na Líne* with four of our *Crossing the Line* European partners. With all roads leading to the Crossing the Line Festival in Galway 2020, the world premiere of *Into the Dark Woods* by Charlene Kelly and then transfer to The Abbey National Theatre of Ireland, 2020 was to be a truly monumental year!

Despite the disaster of the global pandemic and endless Zoom conversations and meetings, creativity remains the mainstay of our routine. Autumn brought great joy, two fold – rehearsals began in earnest for *Into the Dark Woods* (working under strict HSE Covid protocols) and the first annual intake of new students into the school – previously only recruited every three years – enrolling 5 new ‘*Teacups*’ (students), with activities taking place in a dedicated building across the road from our theatre on Munster Avenue. Galway European Capital of Culture extended its provision into 2021, enabling us to fulfil our ambition to stage Charlene’s play later in 2022. We will also digitally capture a live performance for posterity.

All of this validates the incredible work by everyone involved. We hold a strong organizational belief that people with intellectual disability, with the right supports, can make art on a par with other mainstream artists. Over the years, we’ve had the good fortune to be recognised at a number of national and regional awards ceremonies. Among the accolades, we’ve been proud to collect gongs for vocational education by winning the AONTAS STAR Award for Connacht in 2014. With Business2Arts, we’ve been nominated and then shortlisted for our strategic alliances with Brothers of Charity Services for *Best Long term Partnership* and *Best Use of Creativity in a Community*. Petal Pilley herself was awarded the prestigious *Jim McNaughton / TileStyle Artist Bursary* in 2014 and the Allianz Business to Arts Awards, which honours an individual artist. In 2017 we became the national winner of *IPB Pride of Place Award for Culture & Community*, having been nominated by Galway City Council; and national winner of the prestigious *GSK Ireland IMPACT Award*. And there’s been other awards before and since.

The major contributing factor to the creative success of Blue Teapot Theatre Company is the commitment to working with the best professional collaborators, tutors, technicians and volunteers we possibly can, backed by a passionate, committed Board and staff team - none more so than our Blue Teapot Theatre Company artists, performing arts students, Bright Souls and Sparkles.

As the world has come to know, we cannot predict what the remaining part of 2021 will hold. For all in the creative industries, 2020 was our '*Dark Woods*' but now, we intend to do all we can to ensure that 2021 will bring us fully back in to the limelight.

Photo Credits

Andrew Downes: Staff Photos, 'Dancing at Lughnasa', 'Oliver Twists!'.
Reg Gordon: Ronan Loughney, 'Sanctuary' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'



Valerie Egan, Richard Hickey & Katie Dillon in 'St Lucy's Day' 2015



Funders

We greatly appreciate the support we receive from various funding agencies, local authorities, philanthropic organisations and corporate entities. We understand the need for transparency when it comes to our stakeholders and to reassure public confidence about the way in which their money is managed and where their money will be spent. Information on this can be viewed on <http://blueteapot.ie/governance>. We are compliant with The Charities Governance Code (2020).

Blue Teapot's principal funder is Brothers of Charity Services, with financial contributions from Ability West and Galway Roscommon Education Training Board. Our Arts programme is supported by grants from Galway City & County Council Arts Offices. Specific theatre projects are awarded by the Arts Council of Ireland. We are extremely grateful to every individual who chooses to nominate Blue Teapot as a beneficiary of fundraising, or who make a donation. Our website www.blueteapot.ie has details of how anyone can donate to Blue Teapot Theatre. All funders can be viewed on our website <http://blueteapot.ie/about-us/funders>

References

Friel, B. (1990). *Dancing at Lughnasa*. London: Faber & Faber.
Gardner, C. & Isard, P. (2015). *Arts not Disability: Arts, Bravery and Changing Views in Ireland*. Galway, Ireland: Blue Teapot.

Acknowledgements

Blue Teapot would like to gratefully acknowledge the dedication and support given by our voluntary Board of Directors: Fiona Coffey (Chair), Sean Conneally (Secretary), Carol Browne, Ger Lally, Siobhan Ní Ghadhra and Dean Kelly; and our Blue Teapot staff team; Petal Pilley (CEO Artistic Director), Sonja Brodie (General Manager), Hillary Kavanagh (Producer), Judith Wolf (Performing Arts School Manager), Ana Bella Alvarez (PAS Co-Ordinator), Jason Scott (Classroom Assistant & Outreach), Cheryl Hudson (Audience Development) and our amazing tutors, volunteers, arts professionals and support services who guide and work closely with us. Thanks to the Series Editor Patrick McGinley, for the design and layout of this Booklet, '*Celebrating Blue Teapot Theatre Company*'.

Sonja Brodie, March 2021



A Celebration of Quality in the Brothers of Charity Services Ireland

As Service Providers all of us who set out to provide supports to children and adults with special needs recognise that the Quality of the supports we offer is of the utmost importance. Sadly, and all too frequently, when we set out to measure Quality we generally end up measuring the lack of Quality. Our focus, whatever the measurement instrument, too often switches entirely from the 92% of what we do really well, to the 8% which we don't do very well. Of course that 8% needs systematic, corrective and time-lined attention. But we must not give it all of our attention, we cannot allow the 92% to be taken for granted... to fade gently away into the Celtic Twilight. We are pleased to recognise the many important areas where the people we support, staff, families, volunteers and local communities achieve the highest standards. We gratefully acknowledge the tremendous commitment of every member of staff who, working individually and as team members in co-operation with other stakeholders, achieve wonderful, sometimes amazing, outcomes. We are happy to celebrate together in 2021 the level of success we have achieved in implementing the Mission of the Brothers of Charity by: *'Providing quality services to support people who are in danger of being marginalised ... and creating opportunities and choices that develop and maintain connected lives where all are cherished as valued and equal citizens in our communities.'*

Patrick McGinley, Series Editor

In this Series - Published by: Peter Triest Publications, Kilcornan, Clarinbridge, Co Galway. H91 K2E9

Barrett, L. (2021). *SLT out of the Clinic and into Daily Life: Innovative Speech and Language Therapy approaches promoting the use of AAC.*

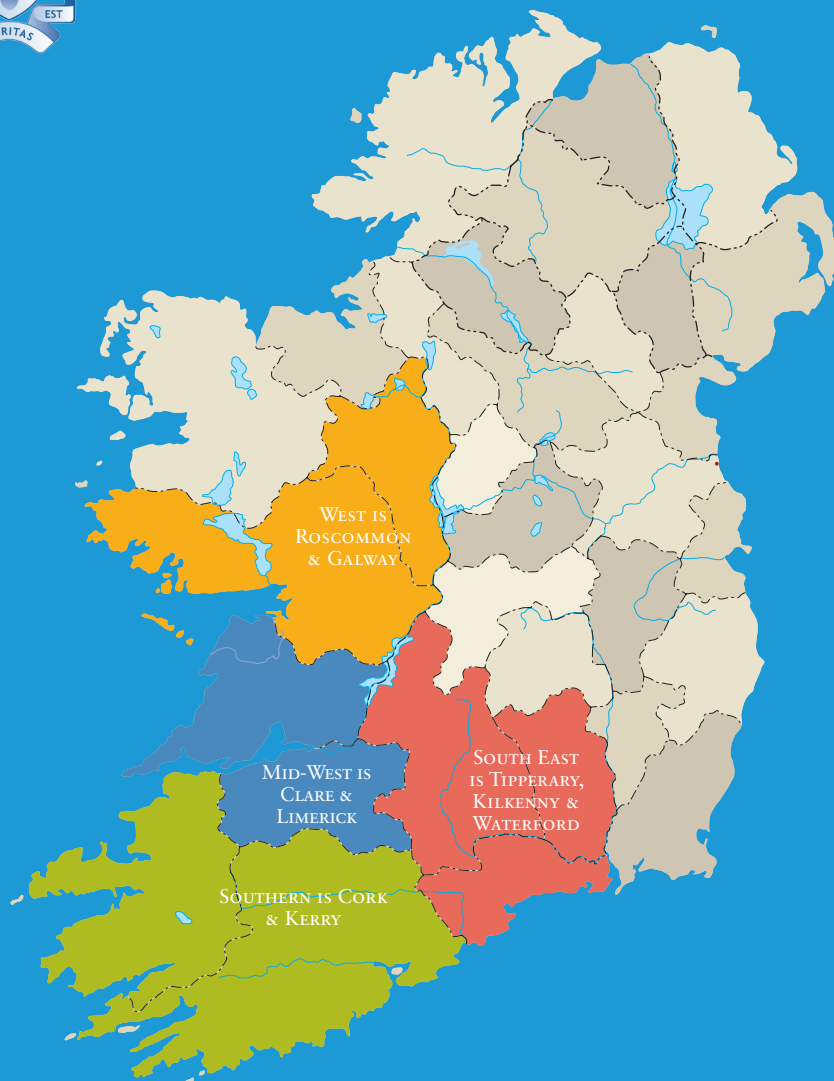
Brodie, S. (2021). *Celebrating Blue Teapot Theatre Company.*

Curtin, É. & Quinlan, L. (2021). *Great Musicians and Music Lovers in the Brothers of Charity Services.*

Hope, L. & Sexton, M. (2021). *Celebrating Fine Art and Great Artists in the Brothers of Charity Services.*

Phelan, L. & O'Regan, H. (2021). *The Dignity of Risk helps you Live your Dream.*

Power, C. & Flynn, S. (2021). *Advocacy - Nothing about Us without Us in the Brothers of Charity Services.*



Over 8,400 men, women and children received support from the Brothers of Charity Services Ireland in 2020, with over 4,300 employees (about 3,500 wte) making it the largest provider of support services for people with intellectual disability in Ireland.