

PLACES MATTER

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BUILDING INCLUSION IN THE ARTS

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[DR JOYCE]: Thank you, good morning everybody. First of all I would just like to thank the Arts Council for inviting me here today to speak and it's important for me to mention that being a doctor, just finished graduating, I was the first Traveller in Ireland to graduate with a PhD.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you for your applause, but I suppose saying that in one way it's really exciting and really brilliant to come this far for my people, but we have been treated in Irish society for decades upon decades, from the foundation of the State, we have been excluded from everything, including the arts in Irish society. And for us we are a nomadic people; the name Traveller was put on to us as a community, we are not called Travellers in our own language, in our own language we are actually called mincéirí, which I suppose not many people know and because of our nomadic ways, people put the name Traveller on us. They didn't know what to make of us in Irish society.

With the foundation of the State here we were a separate group. As Orlaith mentioned, after the foundation of the State, the national identity was really important for Ireland to give a new image to the world after years of British occupation. We can see how Irish people were stereotyped across the globe and Ireland wanted to move away from this stereotype and give itself a new modern image, with a national identity, with its own culture and its own language and own traditional ways.

And in doing that Ireland forgot about us as a community and left us to the side as if we weren't included in Irish society. We can see that through the history books, there's no mention of us in any history documents, any history books, it's as if we have just been wiped off the face of Irish society as a people.

And for me here today, it's an important step for the Arts Council to come up with this [Equality, Human Rights and Diversity] policy, which is a really bold policy, a really bold statement. However, we can also look at the 70th year of the UN Declaration of Human Rights: that was a bold statement 70 years ago. If we look at that and look at the statements made by the Arts Council, statements and policies, they can be bold and they can seem like they are a Utopia, but they are not Utopia if you have the right people working with the right

frame of mind to push an agenda forward, and that's what's needed in all parts of society.

The Arts Council is trying to take that step to make the arts much more diverse than what it has been. For my people, we are very much involved in arts, but we are not seen in the arts scene.

A big part of our tradition is art, it's arts and crafts, many things; singing, dancing, hand crafts, the wagons we built that we used to live in; we have a big place in Irish society when it comes to the arts.

I suppose for me when I look at the arts in Ireland and I can see some things that would be seen as Irish tradition, we can see our connection within some of these arts, but it's not acknowledged. There's lots of cultural appropriation as well. There are lots of things that were made by us as a people, which are in museums and other places, but we are not acknowledged as the artists.

Like for example, I was walking through one museum there a couple of years ago and was brought on a tour through the museum. We stopped at an exhibition; it was a homestead exhibition, so it was looking at Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s and how people lived in Ireland. And in one little corner there was one item that was made by a tinker, a lot of tin-smiths in my community were called tinkers because of the tin-smithing, it was a lamp. That was the Traveller section.

It just gave me a little pit in my stomach; it gave me that feeling of here we go again. It was just to be excluded from something in Irish society, totally excluded. With one word written up.

So people coming in and looking, people aren't learning about our culture, our identity, and our traditions or learning who we are. All people are seeing is the negative stereotypes that are portrayed across the media and people need to see more of the positive things within our community through the arts. I would like to just ask you all to, whatever line of work that you are in, to make sure that you are looking at all parts of society, and that you are not leaving anybody out.

It's all okay having these fancy policies, there's many policies that are in government departments, beautiful policies, really, really progressive and good policies; however, what good are they if they are on the shelf? They are on the shelf for years, gathering dust.

[APPLAUSE]

So sometimes these things kind of annoy me when I hear about the policies being made, because, for example last year the Minister for Housing came on national TV and he was looking for recommendations on how to fix the Traveller housing crisis. And I was basically roaring at the television saying, 'how many more recommendations do you need?'

[APPLAUSE]

It's similar in all sectors of society. Listen to the people that are giving you the recommendations. You can't just slide them off and put them up on a shelf and come back ten years later or five years later and ask what can we do to make it more inclusive? What else can we do for something to happen?

For me as a people, we have so many times over the past 30 years and sometimes I feel like a broken record in Irish society, giving advice, giving recommendations, giving key points. But then it's set and it's just thrown to the side and then something will pop up and then they come again asking for more recommendations and more advice on what they can do.

But what I say today is, the Arts Council, I congratulate you on this bold policy, and brilliant policy. But I would say that, please don't let it go on the shelf. I know there are really brilliant people that are driving this policy forward within the Arts Council and really want it to work.

But I suppose like any sector of society there is going to be people there that don't want policies to work, that just want policies there in name and not in action.

People have to realise, come together and start to debate things, and within the debate you have to make people feel a little uncomfortable in order for them to reflect on themselves and their own attitudes and ideas and prejudice about everything in society. And including about themselves, they need to reflect on themselves.

Once you reflect on yourself and you get an idea of who you are as a person, you can begin to reflect on society and how society works and how it works better when everybody is included and nobody is excluded.

Even if we look at design of buildings, some buildings are totally inaccessible for some groups in society. Even for me, a university campus ten years ago would be totally inaccessible for me, I was overwhelmed my first time going in there, this was a new space. I always get tired of things being overwhelming or feeling a place is not for you or you feel like you are an imposter, you feel like you don't belong or I feel that I'm always the only Traveller in the room, the only Traveller on a panel, you look around and you say 'where are my people?' And you look at everybody in society then and you ask why is that? It's because we haven't thought about including everybody in society.

We have thought about including people that look like us, that talk like us that act like us, that have the same aspirations and ideas as us, but we don't look at people that are different, people that would have different ideas that would push and drive things forward, people that have new ideas and ideas that need to be recognised in society. And these ideas need to be recognised as part of a collective and not as an individual piece of work, it's a collective. If we look at Irish society now, as Orlaith said, Irish society 30 years ago was totally different. It was totally different for the general society, but for us it was even more different, because we were more isolated and more marginalised in Irish society, our traditions, our nomadic ways, our arts and crafts everything had been decimated.

Our culture had been basically criminalised, because it became illegal for us to travel around Ireland and we were forced into these, what they call halting sites. The first halting site was

built in 1968. We can see how the government actually went abroad and looked at how other countries were dealing with "difficult groups of people" and got ideas from that. This came back and this is how halting sites were thought up as a plan.

They are concrete jungles; they are not something we asked for as a people. We didn't ask to be forced into these halting sites, marginalised and separated from general society and isolated from everybody else. We are talking about places matter, places do matter. Because when you are in a place in society, not only I suppose in the physical sense, but where you are isolated from everything and everybody, you are isolated from services, you're isolated from people, you're isolated from communities.

And if you are isolated from communities how can you be part of community as soon as you are separated from them. Places do matter.

When I was doing my thesis, my doctoral research I did my thesis here in Galway, it was on young mincéirí between the ages of 14 to 21, it was that age where it was really important for them to figure out their identity and who they were and to realise what place they had in society. I lots of qualitative work, focus groups and walking around the city to different places with them. And there were many things that I learned from them throughout my research, the thing that struck me was when we're walking around Galway City were the comments that the young people made; they were asking, do you see any representation of us in the city? Where are we in the city? Between the buildings, the architects, the art, the graffiti, all the things that are displayed, the cultural identity that is displayed across Galway City for example, and this really proud cultural heritage that's in Galway City, but yet none of that represented my people, and for the young people it really traumatised them. It gives them a sense of; we're not wanted here in our own town, in our own city, in our own country.

I would have hope and aspirations, and I have met some of the people in the Arts Council, and I think that it's fair to say that they are really hard-working, driven and promising people that will try to deliver on this policy. And hopefully between five and ten years' time that we'll see a difference and we'll see much more people included in the arts in Ireland. So thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]